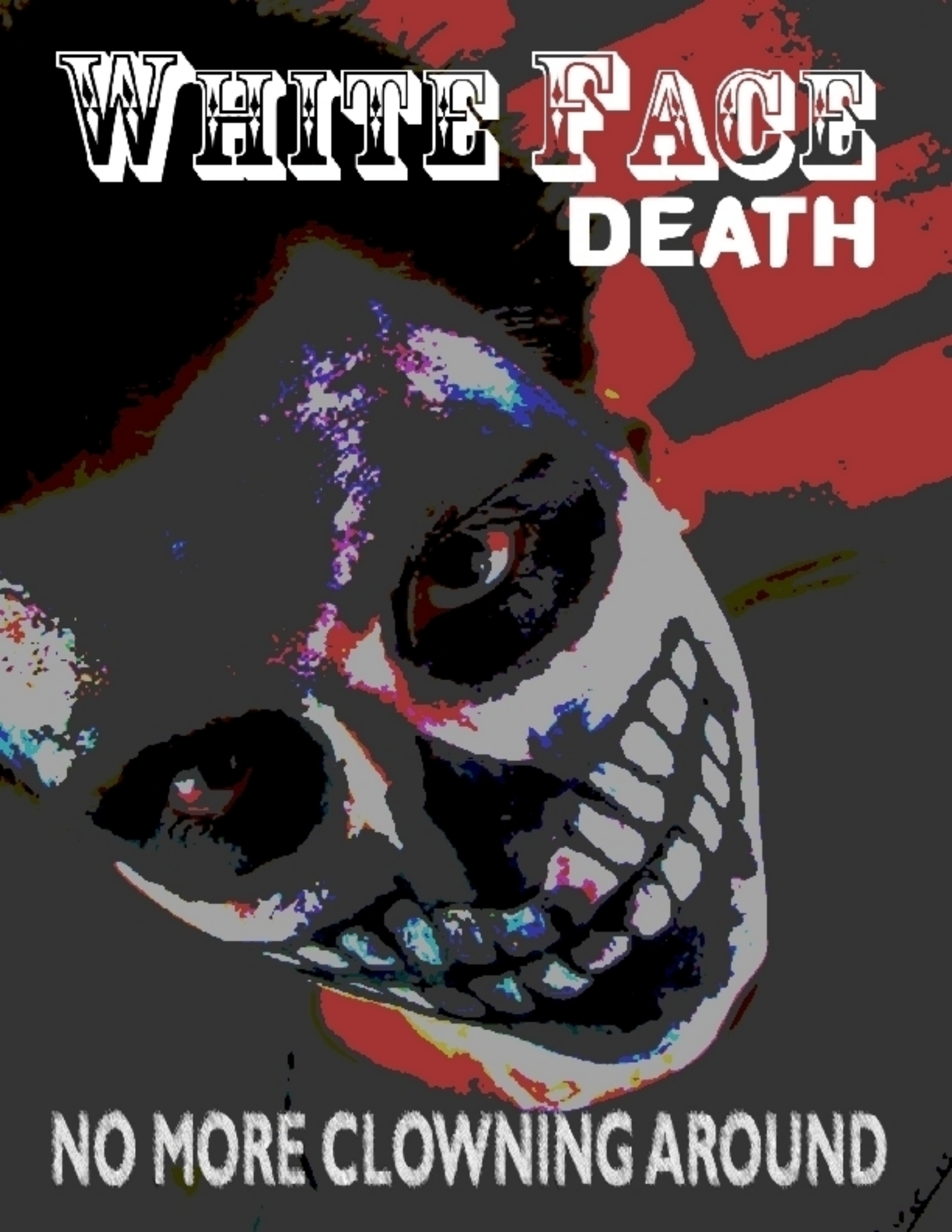
WHITE FACE
DEATH
NO MORE CLOWNING AROUND

WHITE FACE DEATH

Edited
By

Dorothy Davies

COVER ART

"Portrait Of A Creepy Skeleton Guy (carnival Face Painting)" by artur84

GRAPHICS

Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

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Clowning around can be fun, can be dangerous, can be lethal… explore some of the faces behind the white paint with these talented writers…

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CLOWNS

Neil Leckman

The times are oft when I feel down
To have my spirits lifted by a maniac clown
A dervish from damaged dreams
Reality splits right down the seams
They tumble in and make my day
As they find new victims to slay

Thinking that it is a joke they grin
Then cry as the horrors begin
Flay the skin, but save the brain
A bit of reason to feel the pain
Turn the body into a sled
Once the victim is dead

Trails of red on crusted white
Snow and blood will mix and flow
Practical jokers one and all
That answer when I call
So if you're bored come my way
I'm always willing to stop and play…

MUFFLED HEARTBEATS & HAPHAZARD GREASEPAINT

Brian Barnett

Main Street in Elsinor, Kentucky has always been like an ideal Normal Rockwell painting. It was almost as if the outside world had never spoiled their way of life. Men still wore formal hats and women still wore their dresses. It was one of the last of the small slices of Americana left in the world.

It was mid-day on a Saturday in June. It was like any other Saturday. The sidewalks were relatively busy with shoppers going from store to store. There were plenty of smiles and kindly nods until the beat was heard. It was a bizarre, almost unearthly sound, almost like a rhythmic muffled heartbeat in the distance

The sound steadily built on the other side of the hill to Main Street. The street came alive with Elsinor citizens. They whispered to one another inquisitively as the heartbeat grew louder. All eyes were fixated on the horizon and then, through the midday glare, they saw it.

What looked to be a parade marched slowly into view, cresting the hill and approaching the small township of Elsinor. Strangely dressed people looked alien as they shimmered from the heat waves on the asphalt.

“Is there a circus coming to town?” Donald Raeburn asked his wife.

“No, I don’t think so,” she answered, shielding her eyes from the afternoon sun.

Still the rhythmic heartbeat continued as the procession came closer. More people filled the sidewalks, exiting from the local shops. Bill Johnson still had half his face covered with shaving cream from Benson’s Barbour Shop.

The first group of the parade was clowns. None of them looked cheerful. They didn’t run around, they didn’t laugh, they didn’t throw candy - they just marched. Grimy grease paint was haphazardly smeared across their faces. Their visage was a intermingling of white, black, blue and red. Their clothes were dingy and tattered in places.

They walked slowly to the rhythm of the heartbeat. Their eyes, never observing, stared trancelike as they marched in perfect unison.

Behind them marched strongmen carrying cages which housed people. They sat expressionless and stared forward like the clowns, with

unblinking eyes.

"Is that Nadine Pinkerton and Joe Mitchell?" Donald Raeburn asked his wife.

"No, surely not. I'd say they're performers that look a lot like them."

He stared for a moment, and then nodded, unconvinced, "Yeah, I'd say you're right."

Behind the cages marched another clown. He was hammering on a large bass drum, the source of the heartbeat.

Large wagons pulled by horses followed. Even the horses seemed to stare ahead and were in step with the drum beats as well. The wagons themselves were painted yellow, red and green. The paint was old, faded and chipped, making the text unreadable. Large cracks had formed in the wood from dry rot.

A man marched behind the wagons, wearing a crimson coat-tailed suit with a black top hat and crimson ribbon. He had black around his eyes. He looked over to Donald Raeburn's wife, stepped out of the strange parade and approached her. His eyes were yellow with black, slit pupils. "Hello, my dear. Would you care to join us?"

Instantly her demeanor changed. Her expression went from appalled and disgusted to blankly obedient, "Yes, I would like that," she said, barely above a whisper.

Donald grabbed her shoulder and the man in the hat glared menacingly at him. "Tell him it is a part of the show, dear."

"It's a part of the show, dear," she confirmed, not looking at Donald.

The man in the hat grinned, revealing an alligator smile. "You can collect her after the parade." He turned to Donald's wife. "Come along, dear."

She joined the parade and slowly, with the heartbeat, she marched down Main Street. Donald Raeburn stood dejected, and waited for the parade to end.

Within a few minutes, the strange parade was beyond Main Street. It marched out of sight and the heartbeat became muffled and then completely inaudible. The stark silence after such an event was somehow even more unsettling. Slowly the town began to murmur back to life. Some people were obviously shaken by the parade, others – especially the children – were energized.

Donald Raeburn got into his car and drove to the town limits, but never saw a site for a circus. There was nothing more than the rolling hillside and the highway.

He returned home and called every resource he could find, to no avail. There simply was no circus in existence that fitted the description he gave.

Elsinor is a little darker now. Sure, the people still shop in the local shops, the men still wear their hats and the women still wear their dresses. But after Nadine Pinkerton, Joe Mitchell and Mrs. Raeburn disappeared; the townspeople are on constant alert for that slow, rhythmic muffled heartbeat on the horizon.

STAR SPOTTING

Matthew Wilson

Oh wow, it's you.

Sorry, it must be dangerous to stop you in the street like this. I guess you're trying to keep a low profile now most people would try and stab you in the back. Yes, I saw you in the paper. You were the clown killer. I always liked a man with a sense of humour.

Sorry, bad joke but I'm nervous. What are you doing out of prison? I thought they locked you up forever after you stuffed that baby in the chimney. Did you get time off for showing them where you hid the bodies? No, please don't leave. I'm sorry, shall I lower my voice? It's just I've never met someone so high profile. I understand after what you did you wish to keep undercover.

I read all the facts, you know. How you get people alone, squeeze them from the crowd with a joke and a painted smile and later they find a woman's head in the river. Tinsel in her hair like a clown mask. Why did you smear that raspberry bubble candy round their mouth like lipstick? Did that have some meaning?

Don't be shy I won't give you away. I always liked clowns as a child. Oh, shit. Sorry, that I.D's not fake, is it? Wow. Honest mistake; no, I guess you're not him. Jeez, I'm mortified. It must be terrible for someone to walk up and accuse you of being a serial killer. I feel like such a fool. Please, let me buy you a drink, there's a bar over the road.

Are you sure? Look at me, I'm blushing. I'm - sorry, just so sorry. Thank you, that's very kind of you. Bye. Goodbye.

Oh, you! Miss! It's you isn't it? The star of that new vampire show. Oh man, I love that program. Don't play with me. I know you have to keep a low profile in a big city. You don't want any nutter to walk up and ask for your autograph but I'm not like that.

Oh, damn, I've snapped my heel. No, really I'm fine. Oh, alright. Just help me to my car. Yes, I can't believe I met you. Come now, I know a fake I.D when I see it. Would you like to come for a drink? I'm not trying to get you alone but if you have five minutes, there's a bar down the road.

Here, have a raspberry bubble.

THREADBARE TYRANNY

Ron Koppelberger

Chimes and withering roses, warm gusts of perfume and tides of killjoy resolve filled the spaces and clutter that Bacon the Clown occupied. “They’re vermin, dirty lousy vermin!” he whispered to the green witch smiling back at him from the vanity mirror. “Lousy rotten bloodsuckers and jerks, all of em rotting jerks!” he said as his body quivered with anticipation for the performance.

The year had gone as well as it would have had he been in hell, in loathsome cotton candy misery, in popcorn shame and costumed arrays of clown hatred. Tempests and twilight fires, he thought, as he added a few final touches to the grease paint on his face. I’m threadbare with all of this crap he thought, threadbare and burned to the bone with tiny smiling faces and overgrown children looking for the hoot, the holler, the guffaw. His woe had been the motivating factor in his aggression and he simply screamed with joy when the little ones cried out in fear. He grimaced and the paint crinkled with his maniacal grin.

“I’ll show them the tyranny of the threadbare, the tyranny of the wonted clown, in all his glory and with just a touch of glee!” he said aloud as he made his way to the dressing-room door. His black gloved hands slid against the door brass and the knob remained steadfast, outside he could hear laughter, mocking him, shaming him with its accusation.

“Let me out!” he screamed at the door. “Let me out!” The laughter continued and he reared back and slammed his fist into the door. “Let me the hell out!” he screamed in rage. The laughter continued and he grabbed a chair and slammed it against the door until it splintered. “I’ll show you the tyranny of the threadbare, I’ll show you!” he shouted. He grabbed the knob again and jerked hard, the door wiggled in its frame for a moment and the trim came loose, falling to the spotted dirty floor.

He stepped back and then ran toward the door, leading with his shoulder. The door slammed inward before he made contact with it and the carnival barker came in. The momentum of both men knocked them to the ground and the barker died on the spot after hitting his head hard against the floor. Bacon knelt over the barker and shivered with the cool air that floated

across the circus common. Spit rolled from between his lips and he coughed a few times as he tried to rouse the man.

Two children screamed and pointed at the clown. “He’s the one, he’s crazy, he killed that man!” Bacon raised his head and shook it. “No… it was an accident, I was locked in and it was an accident!” A crowd gathered and the clown tried to regain his feet. A large bearded woman stomped on his foot and he fell back to the ground.

“He killed Al! He killed Al the Carney, Leroy!” Leroy looked at the clown and slammed his fist into his face. Leroy’s hand came away with a smear of paint and blood. Bacon fell to the ground and moaned. “The door was locked… I couldn’t get out, it was an accident, I swear it!”

There were dozens of people around the clown now and they all took turns punching and kicking him.

“STTTTTOOOOOPPPPPPP… it was an accident, an accident!” he said through broken and bleeding lips.

When they were finished they tossed his body into one of the large green trash dumpsters along with his belongings.

He awoke near midnight. There was dried blood covering his face and he had two black eyes that were swollen and puffy. His legs ached from the bruising and his side hurt like crazy.

“Arrrrrgggggghhhh!” he said as he spit out a gob of blood. Gray clouds tinged the midnight sky and he thought of moving west as he climbed out. “Gotta get goin! he said to himself and the dirty green dumpster. He staggered to the main tent and he looked for the generator that powered everything in the circus. There it was… ten gallon cans of diesel fuel lining the yard next to the generator. Bacon reached into his baggy trousers and pulled out a lighter.

“I’ll teach those no good jerks!”

He dumped over one of the canisters and watched it flow under the main tent. He reached into his pocket again, pulled out a scrap of paper and lit it. He tossed the burning paper into the diesel then limped-ran to the edge of the encampment and the road leading west away from the circus. The big tent caught fire and by the time he got away there were several explosions.

“Gotta go west,” he said to himself as he made his way into the night, a threadbare tyranny on his mind.

BINDLE BILL'S COMMAND PERFORMANCE

Ken L. Jones

I don't remember putting on my makeup
But I must have because I just saw my reflection
In the murky rain puddle by my big clown shoes
I don't remember putting on my hobo tatters
But since I'm wearing them it must be true
I don't remember donning this well patched derby
Nor putting this cigar stub in my mouth
I don't remember picking up my bottomless bindle
But since it's on my shoulder what's there to argue about
I don't remember how I got in the center of all three rings
But since I'm already here then here I am
Doing the act of the world's happiest rider of the rails
The clowning tramp beloved by every child, woman, and man
I thought the fire would have changed all that
Now that's the one thing I still do recall
The flaming tent, the stampeding circus animals,
The flying Wachowskis as they fell
And how the audience stomped to death
Anyone who barred their path while seeking an exit
That was no longer there
And how the smoke and soot blinded
Every one of them as they scrambled everywhere
And the screams of the children I will never forget
They're still echoing in my ears even yet
Now I would have sworn that I burned to death
But how can that be true
Or else why am I still standing here doing my act for you
Why only a ghost… oh dear God now I truly remember
How all that destruction was the fault of nobody else but me
I did it to get back at my circus's owners
When they said they no longer needed me
And since I had no place else to go
I decided to take them all to Hell with me

And I guess I must have done exactly that
Because here I am not in the rings of any circus I've ever known
But instead smack dab in the center of the infernal regions
Where I put on an endless show
For all the damned who dwell below
And I am the source of all their sadistic mirth and glee
As they mock and catcall me
And I suspect that it will never end
Because Hell indeed is forever my friend.

THE BIG TOP'S FULL

Timothy Frasier

"Bobby Jacks said he saw a clown today. It was walking down the tracks just out of town, headed towards the old Number Nine mines. He said it was all bloody like it had just fed on some poor bastard."

"Dang it, Beans! Been so long since we'd seen one, I thought they'd all gone. What could it want? Everybody's done been ate that didn't run in the beginning."

"Not everybody. There's still three meals left… me, you and Bobby Jacks."

"Oh shit! Don't put it like that! We need to get out o' here!"

"Where do you propose we go to, Pockets? Tell me a place that the clowns haven't overran weeks ago. We're sitting pretty here. This bluff overlooks the tracks with just one way in and one way out, making it easy to defend. Plus we're still close to town if we need to slip in for water. We have everything we could possibly want. Well, except for food."

"I might not be a college boy like you, but looks more to me like a place to be cornered in. I'd feel safer takin' my chances on the tracks. It's getting' close to dark, when's Bobby Jacks comin' back?

"He should have already been back. The truck stop's less than an hour away by foot."

"If he don't find no food, we'll have to take to the road whether you want to or..."

"Hello, boys!"

"You scared the shit out o' me, Bobby Jacks! Find any food?"

"Bet your ass I did! Get the pot to boiling; I got us some fresh meat."

"Where did you find fresh meat?"

"Now don't go to asking twenty questions, Beans. I got us some fucking meat, so get the water boiling so we can eat! Ha! I'm a poet! Look here in my cooler at this red meat. Even without ice it's still cool enough not to spoil."

"You've done real good, Bobby Jacks. Come here, Beans. Take a look at all this… hey Bobby Jacks! Look at your hand, you've been bit!"

"You've been bitten? Spill it, Bobby Jacks! What happened out there today?"

“Don’t shit yourself, Beans! Just a little bite, I’m fine. Fucking clown ambushed me as I left the truck stop. I chopped his head off with my machete, but not before he nipped me. The truck stop was picked cleaner than a baboon’s ass and I wasn’t about to come back empty handed. You’ve heard the old saying, *turnabout’s fair play*. These bastards will eat us if they get a chance, so I figured we’ll just eat them!”

“Remember when Benny Blue Balls was bitten? Next day he was clowned out to the max!”

“What are you sayin’, Beans? You going to up and kill me without knowin’ for sure?”

“You’ve seen what happens. What would you do if you were in my position?”

“Well, for one thing, we’re all starving to death. Being dead or being clown… I don’t see much difference. Whether I’m going to turn into one of them fuckers or just plain ol’ die, let me do it with a full belly. Throw some more wood on that fire, Pockets.”

“He makes good sense, Beans. I’ve eaten a little bit of everything. Clown can’t taste much worse than some of the shit Dirty Ben used to fix. Hey, remember that stew we made when we was camped out behind that abortion clinic in Memphis?”

“I’ve tried to forget about that. Much as I hate to admit it, you’re right. We don’t have any more options. Get to cooking.”

“Your wish is my command! Find some more branches, Pockets.”

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“Well Bobby Jacks, it might not be steak, but it’s not half bad. What do you think, Pockets? Pretty good, huh?”

“You bet!”

“Watch me through the night, Beans. I don’t want to wander the land looking like a circus reject. If my face turns white or my lips turn red, chop my head off.”

“Consider it done, friend. Douse the fire, Pockets. It’s dark enough now that a fire would show for a long way. I just hope any clowns in the area won’t be able to locate us by smell.”

“You know, right before I got bit, I was thinking about my dad. He worked at a truck stop for years, right out of Little Rock. I remember him
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telling me one dark and stormy night, ‘When the big top’s full, the clowns will walk the earth.’ I thought he was full of shit at the time, but how was I to know?”

“Go to sleep, Bobby Jacks. We’ll wait and see what morning brings.”

THE RETURN

Matthew Wilson

Do not trust the clowns.
I was very small when they came to my town
And took my friend. I think I saw him at the carnival
But he was changed. Not a complete conversion
They had removed his lips and stretched his jaw
For that hideous smile. The paint came later
A tattoo like a searing on the brain, making him mad
And I, the coward, lived, because I hid as they took the children
And moved on.
Today I saw a poster. The clowns are coming back
The air smells of unwashed cages again
And small children are magnetised by sweet popcorn
But the years have made me no braver
And I shall stay in my room, armed for them, or myself
They shall not take me alive.
I think they know they missed me last time.
Faces at the window are not completely in my dreams
For fun, they leave balloons tied to my door handle
You can't say they don't enjoy a joke. For twenty years
They have had fun torturing me.
It will be good to have some closure. Let them come.
I have some party poppers of my own.
Do not trust the clowns. For tonight they come to town.

THE LAST LAUGH

Anna Harris

“It’s done,” said the voice, matter-of-factly.

Mel heard her heartbeat over the faintly static crackle. “Oh, uh-huh, all right.” She managed to choke out an answer to the voice on the other end of the line and, after hearing the decisive clunk, hurriedly replaced her own handset back in its cradle as though it were venomous.

She stared, dumbstruck, at the wall phone and then, perhaps out of habit or because of an overwhelming need to do something, anything, to take her mind off the call, she took up a cloth and wiped the handset down, before putting it back on the hook again and moving to the front room.

From behind the flywire screen door she gazed out to the invisible point where pastel golden paddocks met the unmade road skirting the property. As much as she wanted to, she refused to allow herself to get caught up in positive thinking; it only led to disappointment. No, she would focus on acting normal despite the nervous hope now coursing through her thin body. Just because other women had escaped their bullying partners didn’t mean Mel would be as lucky.

She wasn’t certain how long it would take Shaun to return from Jenny and Doug Thompson’s farm but he’d already been gone over half an hour. Jenny had said he could come round and look over the lots prior to the public clearing sale the next week.

Mesmerised by the blankets of warm wind rippling shimmery patterns across pale wheat stalks, Melanie stood in the doorway until dust swirls rose up in the distance, indicating Shaun would arrive home at the farmhouse within minutes. He wasn’t a hulking great man by any means but regular, menacing intimidation backed up by physical aggression had Melanie dashing back to the kitchen. She busied herself rearranging an already tidy pot drawer. He wouldn’t be pleased to see her being idle.

“Melanie, come on out here,” Shaun called. An order, not a request.

She inhaled deeply and composed herself, wiping clammy hands down her apron before joining her husband outside by his truck.

“Take a look at this,” he grunted, untying ropes.

“Jenny sold you something?”

“No, I bought sumthin’. There’s a difference.”

Melanie's hands toyed with the bottom of her apron and tiny beads of perspiration formed on her brow. She averted her gaze from the truck and focused instead on her bare toes. "You spoke to Doug?"

"Did I *say* that?" he snapped, struggling to heave the cumbersome purchase onto the back porch. "He wasn't there. He's never bloody around these days; the farm's a shambles. Useless frickin' farmer he turned out to be. No wonder they're movin' on."

"It must be hard for him with only one arm, though. I mean, after the accident—"

"What would you know about hard work?" Shaun removed the cover.

"This is what you bought? A sideshow laughing clown machine?" she said, trying to keep the shake out of her tone.

The clown's overly large painted red lips exaggerated the outline of its enormous fibreglass mouth but Melanie couldn't look at it for longer than a few seconds without getting goose bumps. "I thought you were on the lookout for farm equipment?"

"They didn't have nuthin' useful, just a load of old rusted shit. I spotted this little money-maker right away; it was in amongst the rest of their junk. At first Jenny didn't wanna sell it but after a bit of fancy talking, I persuaded her to part with it. Stupid cow even ended up throwing in a box of balls with it, too." Shaun chuckled at his good fortune.

"What if Doug gets home and wants it back?"

"Stiff shit, if Doug wanted it he shoulda been there. And if I want your opinion I'll ask for it." Melanie winced. "Jenny took the cash so it's mine now."

Mel was fairly certain Shaun knew she didn't like clowns. How typical of her husband that he wouldn't think twice about bringing one home.

"Why's its mouth so big?" She heard herself babbling but couldn't seem to stop. "I don't remember them looking like this. Aren't these things normally supposed to take little table tennis balls? It's really very creepy, don't you think?"

"Nope. And quit it with all the goddamn questions; you're starting to annoy the shit out of me." Shaun scowled and buffed one side of the clown's faded blue hat with the sleeve of his elbow. "A bit of polish oughta brighten up this chap to nearly new again."

He laughed, throaty and boastful. “This’ll make a real fine attraction at the district fair.” He chortled again, circling the clown like an arrogant lion surveying its latest fresh kill. “What a prize!”

Even though she knew better, a new-found boldness brought on by Shaun’s exuberance infused her. “It’s not exactly a cheerful looking kiddie thing, though, is it? Even without the faded paintwork, its eyes have sort of an evil glint about them.”

Shaun stood over her and raised a threatening hand. “That’s enough out of you. Do you know how ridiculous you sound?” Melanie cowered. “You sound like a bloody three year old. Go find something to clean it with and do it without opening your cakehole again. Then you can start to work on giving this clown a good scrub.”

“Sorry, Shaun,” she croaked.

“I said, GO. Get out of my sight.”

Melanie hastily retreated inside the house lest he follow his words with a physical declaration. Even after the earlier phone call–a minute glimmer of hope of a life out from under Shaun’s domineering rule–she knew better than to provoke him unnecessarily so she gathered liquid cleaner, cloths and a bucket of soapy water as swiftly as she could.

“That was quick.” Melanie imagined his voice had lost its belligerent edge but his attitude was always difficult to predict. It was best not to be complacent.

“I know you don’t like to be kept waiting, Shaun,” she said quietly, her head bent low. Over the years she’d learned her husband regarded direct eye contact as confrontational behaviour.

“Just get on with it,” he grumbled. “I want to see it sparkling by the time I get back.”

“Of course, Shaun, I’ll do my best,” she said.

Melanie pulled on rubber gloves and sloshed a bit of water over the clown without touching it, deliberately avoiding the mouth and funnel area of the machine even though they were covered with the most stains and grime. She shuddered. She couldn’t bring herself to physically touch the thing let alone stare at it. As she knelt before the laughing clown, the sponge in her hand hovering inches above the smooth contours, its eyes seemed to sparkle with mischievous intent.

Ten minutes later the laughing clown’s fibreglass shell looked as dull as ever.

“You haven’t done a damn thing to it, you useless moron!” shouted Shaun, approaching the verandah. Melanie sprang upright. ”Do I have to do everything my bloody *self*?” He slammed down a box of overly large balls–twice the size of tennis balls–beside the machine.

“Sorry Shaun, I tried but I—”

“You didn’t try too bloody hard. You’ve got more detergent on the decking you’re standing on than you have on the clown!”

“Do you even know if it’s going to work, Shaun? Have you plugged it in?”

“Oh for shit’s sake, you’re always so bloody negative. Here, pass it to me and I’ll show you.”

Melanie unwound the coiled lead and held the plug up to him. Before she had time to react, Shaun grabbed both her wrists in one hand and brought his other one back, hard, across the side of her face sending her reeling.

“That’s how *I* work, d’ya hear me?” he shouted. “You don’t question me. You don’t *ever* question me; got that?”

Except that she’d been the brunt of similar blows many times during the course of their marriage, Melanie felt she might have been struck with a lump of concrete as a hand. The livid colour spreading across her cheek had very quickly become a puffy, stinging welt.

He raised his arm again and took a step towards her. “You *got* that?” he repeated through gritted teeth.

“Y... yes, Shaun,” she stammered through a swelling lip. The left side of her face burned and she couldn’t be entirely certain she hadn’t broken an ankle when she’d fallen. No doubt she would find out when she tried to stand but for now at least, it was safer to stay sprawled where she’d landed.

Melanie didn’t look up, didn’t move, but watched Shaun’s heavy work boots move to the wall of the verandah behind the laughing clown and saw his ugly calloused hand reach down for the power point. Whatever happened now was out of her control and with every likelihood she’d pay with another beating, she prayed the machine would work because if it didn’t...

With the machine plugged in, Shaun flicked the power to the on position and the laughing clown whirred into noisy action. Melanie tentatively raised her head to view the scene.

The clown's head rattled and swivelled jerkily towards her, one malevolent starry eye appearing to wink conspiratorially. Shaun stood transfixed before it. In the golden glow of late afternoon sun, his expression had taken on a softened look of boyish innocence and Melanie thought at that single instant in time–to someone that didn't know otherwise–he gave the impression of looking a little sweet.

The illusion soon shattered.

"What the hell's stopping the head from moving all the bloody way across?" he snarled, thumping the side of it. She knew not to answer. "Seems to be something jamming up the works."

Melanie cautiously and quietly inched backwards on her rear as Shaun reached a fat hand into the gaping mouth. "Can't... quite... reach...but I can feel..."

When he pushed his arm further into the contraption, Melanie blocked her ears and bawled loudly and uncontrollably over his chilling screams.

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"Did I tell you I've decided to have a bit of a clear out, Shaun? It's time to move on... get off this run-down farm. You're not exactly handy around the place anymore."

Shaun scowled, took a sip of his tea and without saying a word, set the cup back on the table.

"First thing to go is that grubby old bloodstained laughing clown game. It's been gathering dust in the shed for nearly two years now. Two years," she sighed aloud. "Imagine that.

"I've come upon the family it should go to. I don't think you've met Tanya Patterson, have you? She and her husband Michael bought a smallholding on the outskirts of the valley about six months ago. Poor young thing had quite a nasty bruise the other day when I got chatting to her in the grocery store. Told me she got that black eye when she walked into a door. She must be a very clumsy woman because it's not the first shiner I've seen her wearing."

Shaun cleared his throat and stared out the window.

Melanie tapped the side of her nose. "I had a little one-on-one chat with Tanya about this and that and she put it to Michael that he drive over
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this afternoon to take a look at what we're selling. I personally think he'd be just the type to be attracted by the laughing clown. Here's hoping, anyway."

"Don't look so downhearted, my sweet; I've sharpened the rotor blades, given it a good dose of lubrication and the clown's working as well as it ever has... oh, except for the head movement. That's still stuck of course, but then it has to be, doesn't it! All part of its charm, really.

"Ooh, speak of a brutal bastard and the bastard appears—that looks like Michael's truck making its way along the track now. You be compliant now Shaun, and sit here quietly while I go out and talk business. I wouldn't want what's left of that ugly stump of an arm of yours frightening him off. I won't be long."

Fifteen minutes later Shaun watched through the window as Melanie waved Michael off the property.

"Y'know," she said once back inside, "I could not for the life of me convince the stubborn ignoramus of a man not to buy that antiquated sideshow game; I tried to explain that since it hasn't been switched on for years I wasn't sure it would still work properly but he simply wouldn't take no for an answer."

Melanie giggled. "And to think I used to be afraid of laughing clowns. That one changed my life and now I'm hoping it does the same for Tanya Patterson.

"Excuse me a moment while I put in a quick phone call to her and then I'll see to your dinner. Minced steak tonight, methinks."

Shaun retched over the sink as Melanie took up a pen and doodled on her notepad while she waited for the phone at the other end to be picked up.

"It's done," she said.

THE FROZEN ORANGE HOTEL

G K Murphy

Beneath darkening indigo skies
Where as well the gulls and crows flock
As heavenly spies with eyes
There comes upon the door a most untimely knock…

Old Maggie and her crooked walking stick
Marches out to see who's there
Her spine straightens with a coherent crick
Tossing back her grey-white dishwater hair…

"What is thee wanting?" she beckons
"A room for the night," the young couple say
And Maggie leads them in but reckons
They will not see the remainder of the day…

"Frozen Orange is a restless quarry," Maggie insists
And the young couple listen and learn
But quarterly Maritime mists
Will either whet or burn…

The hotel on the cliff, facing the sea
The Frozen Orange Hotel be its name
The death of legions it's surely been
Stole away the spirit of Man, with no hint, nor glimmer of shame…

"This is thy room, three pennies please,"
And they enter without fear
But Satan moves with ease
As the slip-road to Hell is nigh-on always clear…

Blustery winds, for this vicinity bordering the coast
It batters the windows and shutters
Damages those who will feel it the most

As the creature rises up and relentlessly mutters…

“Humankind, upon you I feed,”
But falls not upon their young delicate ears
“You were born of the seed,”
Realize now, a fresh new fear…

Three entire pennies is surely a price indeed
For poor, homeless folks like these
But the Frozen Orange is a strange breed
For all the night they be; locked inside by sturdy brass bolts and coppery keys…

What occurs in these wee small hours
Whilst our shivering guests slumber and sleep
In rooms, cold, blanketed and dour
The Clown enters, to visit and sample his keep…

Enters the room in darkness, for Clown has a key
Shifts up to his adolescent prey while they rest
And in the room ‘n darkness his yellow eyes can see
That Maggie led him this night, where await a blood-soaked human nest…

He, the Clown, butchers and fresh new meat he claims
His youthful and sinewy lottery, look and taste fine
Frozen Orange, their solemn repute he shames
For the two guests, t’ night, are first in his grotesque line…

Clown for immortal presidency is the evil vote
His gross bloody hunger and craving, though we abhor
As he will forever sit upon his bar-stool and gloat
Remove the guise of Clown and out the back-door.

ANIMAL MEMORIES

J.R. Roper

The woman seated across the table reminded Rosie of God with her wrinkled brown skin and concerned eyes. Her white hair was pulled back in a tight bun. On the phone, she'd sounded hysterical, now she seemed calm. She'd said the circus was in town for the county fair and that if Rosie was going to help her, it had to be now. Whatever the hell that meant.

"How can I help you?" Rosie asked, half-expecting the woman to breakdown into indiscernible muttering as she'd done on the phone.

"The people there won't help me. They won't say a word, or they'll be next. I know it." The woman curled both hands around her coffee mug and hunched over it like a monkey eating a banana.

"As I said on the phone, I'm a law abiding citizen and won't use evidence gained illegally." Rosie readied her pen to jot down notes. "I didn't catch the location on the phone. Where was your daughter last seen, again?"

"She was at the Rothbury Fair with her friends. She went to the concession alone and disappeared." The woman shook her head. "Disappeared right here in her home town. Police said she run off with someone. But not my Rachel. She wouldn't."

Rosie had read every article on the case she could find and not a single witness had come forward. Once people were desperate, they'd seek out Rosie, the Shadow Investigator. Ask her to help them and later, if she solved the crime, ask how she'd done it.

"I charge one thousand for an investigation. Five hundred now and the rest tomorrow if you get results."

The woman tilted her head. "How can you—the police have been searching for a year and haven't found a damn thing. Now you expect to find something overnight?"

Rosie nodded.

The woman pulled an envelope from her purse. "What's your name, again?"

Rosie took the envelope, thumbed the bills like a deck of cards and shoved it into her bag. "Chances are you won't want to pay me the rest if I give you bad news."

The woman shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "I'll pay you." She forced a smile. "What do you do, exactly?"

"I talk to all the witnesses." Rosie stood and pulled her messenger bag over her shoulder. "And when I find the truth," she leaned close, so close she could smell flowery perfume, "I seek justice."

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Rosie stepped up to the concession stand and watched a young man sweep the floor in preparation for the Circus' big Friday night crowd. "Did you work here last year?"

The young concessionaire looked up at her and then continued sweeping. "Yeah, third summer."

"God, I remember hearing about that girl. The one that disappeared."

"I don’t know nothing about that. Already told the police. Didn’t see nothing."

"No, I wasn’t asking you about her. I just remembered hearing something on the news. You know how it goes. Hear about something awful today and forget about it tomorrow."

"Yup." He nodded. "Don't even remember what she looked like from the photos the police kept flashing. Too bad, though. I remember thinking she was pretty."

"So what time does the circus start tonight?"

"About three hours." After he spoke the boy began sweeping faster. "People will be pouring in soon and I won't get a break 'til midnight."

"Thanks." Rosie tapped the countertop. "Be back later for some food."

"I'll be here," he said.

Rosie strode away from the circus concession and grandstand area. It was a race track with a large space in the middle for everything from concerts to the circus. It wasn’t a great circus, but the best one that'd come around here for anyone who enjoyed watching animals submit and clowns wheel around with painted on smiles. She passed through the fairway with its deep-fried air and screaming children who wanted something else. She decided to warm-up for the night by going to the horse barn. Horses were one of her favorite animals to talk to.
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The horse barn was full of teams for pulling wagons, most of them Clydesdales. Rosie petted several, but none seemed inviting enough to talk to. A sign that read *Circus Trolley* hung on the gate of a blonde-maned work horse named Bunny. The horse smelled sweet, like sweat mixed with oats and molasses. Her pulling partner, Britt, scoffed at Rosie and refused to even face her.

Rosie glanced around for owners but no one was near. "Here, Bunny." She held out her hand as if to offer a treat. Bunny came near and Rosie placed her hand on the horse's head. Cold traveled down her arm and out her fingertips.

Share a memory with me. Something that felt wrong? Rosie thought.

The horse neighed and for a moment Rosie thought she might be rejected. But the cold turned to warmth and it spread from the horse, up Rosie's arm and to her head. She felt it, the spinning, a dizziness that plunged her into the horse's memory.

We trotted through the parking lot, a wagon rolling behind. This had to be the circus trolley. We approached the grandstands from the back. Two men stood beyond the gate. One with a blue cap and the other with longer hair, a circus performer, no doubt.

The man in the blue cap approached. He patted us on the head. "Got another sick one I need brought out. A baby elephant."

The memory share ended as the man's face faded to black.

Rosie clung to the horse, hugging its head. It had been weeks since she used animal speak and she felt drained.

"Like that horse, do you?" a man asked from behind.

Rosie opened her eyes and released, forcing herself to stay calm but unable to stop the sticky sweat from coating her forehead. "I just love animals." She rubbed between the horse's eyes, a gentle thank you for sharing the memory.

The man leaned against the gate next to her. She recognized the blue cap and the scruffy-gray beard. What the horse hadn't communicated was his smell—rotten onion and dirty hair.

"Old Bunny here is one of my trolley horses. Gets to start work soon. Transports the elderly and that, see."

"Do you run the trolley, then?" Rosie asked with fake interest.

"No," he drew out the word. "I'm head grounds-keeper. Lots of responsibility around here during circus and fair week. I'll be happy when

racing season starts." He stared at her chest for a moment.

"Yeah, I'm sure it’s the busiest week of the year." Rosie patted the horse again, hoping he would take the cue and leave her alone.

"You love animals so much, want to come and meet some of the circus animals? I know the ringmaster real well." He leaned closer to her.

The words sent razors down the backs of Rosie's arms and her scalp tingled a warning. The horse's memory had shown this man interacting with the ringmaster and it sounded like they had something to bury. Maybe they pretended to have sick animals but really had human corpses? If she was going to seek justice, she had to play along and figure out what these bastards were up to.

"I'm Rosie. And you?"

He lifted his blue cap. "Frank Patch. Most friends call me Patch."

"I would love to meet the animals, Patch." Rosie walked close enough to make herself gag. But she fought the acid creeping up her throat and took him by the arm. They walked through the growing crowd who might've thought them a couple. More vomit threatened to fill her mouth. Patch nodded at the circus ticket booth and walked through. They rounded the grandstands, walked over the race track and entered a massive yellow and white tent. The inside was abuzz with animal tenders feeding and grooming. A few half-dressed clowns sped to and fro.

A long-haired, muscular guy, the same from the memory, approached and shook Patch's hand. If he wasn’t involved in this, Rosie would've considered dating him. But justice was more important than her defunct love life.

"This is Gerard, the ringmaster," Patch said.

Gerard shook her hand, sending a happy shiver through her body. "Nice to meet you."

"Patch said I could meet the animals."

Gerard's dark eyes twitched for a moment and then glanced at Patch. "Yes, of course you can." He led her to the cage of a huge white tiger. "This is Chloe. She'll not harm you with me here."

Rosie wondered if the tiger might finish her off with one swipe. If maybe this was how the men killed their victims. Her head would fit in its giant jaws. One shake and a loud snap, she'd be dead.

"What’s your interest with animals?" Gerard opened the gate a crack.

"Always wanted to be a veterinarian." Rosie stepped through the thick steel bars.

"I'd better get to work," Patch said. "Have fun, you two."

Rosie's heart pulsed in her neck, her ears, all the way to her toes. She slowed her breathing and focused on the tiger.

"Hi, Chloe. Can I pet you?"

The tiger lay on its side as if it sensed her animal nature. She kneeled beside the cat.

"Loves to have her neck scratched," Gerard said. He'd entered behind her. Was it to protect her or kill her? Sadly this was often her dilemma with men. Overbearing or threatening.

Rosie scratched Chloe's neck and the tiger rubbed back like her house cat, Chubs. She focused on the memory sharing and the cold quickly created the line of connection.

Will you show me what these men do to girls?

Warmth raced back to Rosie's body and she entered the memory faster than she'd ever done before.

She and the tiger breathed heavily. Something was being taken from Chloe. Anger forced them to slam into the gate. A cub stood on the other side. Gerard and Patch argued but the words were unclear. Anger. So much anger filled Chloe that hearing anything wasn't possible. Gerard picked up the cub and handed it to Patch who smiled from ear to ear. What happened next forced Rosie to close her eyes before seeing it. All she knew was that the cub was dead and Chloe sunk to the ground with as much anger and sadness as was known to any human.

Rosie fought back tears when she emerged from the memory. Her heart was beating against her throbbing throat. She still hadn't seen anything about the girl, but she knew enough about these two men to hate them.

"Are you okay?" Gerard asked, concern weighing his words.

"She's just a beautiful creature."

"You were like, in a trance or something. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I meditate over the animals. It's how I connect with them."

"Okay." Gerard placed a hand on her shoulder and she wanted to dive behind the tiger and watch her get revenge for her cub. She'd tell her to. Encourage her to murder for her lost cub.

"Want to see the elephants?"

As they left the cage, Chloe growled and began to pace back and forth. Rosie had pulled a memory into her thoughts and made her relive the worst moment in all her nine lives.

The elephants were separated into stalls, locked behind gates that seemed a joke to a powerful elephant. Rosie moved close to one, but Gerard stopped her. The elephant stared at her with its dark blinking eyes as if begging her to come forward. Telling her it had something to share.

"Better not get to close to them," Gerard said. "They're mean bastards, these elephants. Only listen well to the electric shock or the whip." He cracked a smile and held his whip, like a boy who just caught a snake and was about to show it to his mother.

"They are majestic, though, aren't they?" Rosie asked.

Gerard considered the elephant for a moment. "You could say that." He glanced down at his watch. "Tell you what. How about you come around after the show when they're tired out and you can get close. Maybe even touch them." He arched his eyebrows and stared at her. The flowing dark hair and bad-boy smile almost enough to make him attractive.

Was this how they'd brought Rachel into their lair? Enchanted her with the animals? Well that poor girl probably wasn't ready for them. Rosie was and she'd sort them out, one way or another.

"Well, thank you. I would love to come back after the circus."

Gerard pulled a ticket from his pocket and held it out to her. "VIP seat just for you."

Rosie took the ticket, gave a fake smile and walked away.

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"I'll have a hotdog and a coke," Rosie said to the young concessionaire. "Told you I'd be back."

"Yes, you sure did." He glanced at Rosie's chest. "Five dollars, please."

She handed him the money and took the hotdog and coke from the counter.

"Do me a favor?" the young man asked.

Rosie nodded.

He handed her another hotdog and pointed to a German Shepherd trotting down the fairway toward them, weaving through the crowd. "Feed
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old Hunter for me. Boss doesn’t like me feeding him."

"Sure." Rosie took the hotdog and called for Hunter. The dog paused, perked his ears and walked toward her slowly as if stalking her. She unwrapped the hotdog and held it out for him. The dog took the food gently, huffed it down in three bites and trotted away.

"Poor boy. Should take him with me when I leave."

"Why do you say that?" Rosie asked.

"His owner is, um…."

"Whose dog is he?"

The boy glanced up and then quickly back down as he took a hand towel and wiped down the counter.

Rosie turned to find Patch leaning against the side of the concession stand.

"Hey there." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "My seat's next to yours. Can't wait for the circus to start." His smell was worse now as he'd tried to conceal his stink with cheap deodorant.

"Thanks for the food, young man," she said.

The concessionaire continued working hastily. Patch glared at the boy and looked like he wanted to cuss him out.

"Circus starts in half an hour. Lead the way," Rosie said.

The grandstands were half full when they took their seats in the reserved section. A young woman checked their tickets and looked from Patch to Rosie, staring Rosie in the eye for a moment longer than a casual glance. Patch placed a jacket on his seat and said he'd be back after checking-in with the other grounds keepers.

Rosie ate her plain hotdog, pink and fleshy, like a pickled finger, and sipped her coke. Footsteps shuffled and skidded on the bleachers and a mixture of sweat and too much perfume hung over them like a haze. Directly in front of her was the asphalt racing track made into a stage with a large portable curtain behind, blocking the view of the yellow tent entrance.

Patch returned with a red Slushy for her. "Red is my wife's favorite."

Rosie looked at his left hand. Sure enough he wore a gold wedding band on his ring finger. She sipped her Slushy. It tasked like fake cherry mixed with cold plastic.

"How long’ve you been married?"

"Twenty years this September. Loves the month of September, my wife."

"Why isn’t she here? At the circus with you?"

Patch adjusted his blue cap and stared ahead. "Doesn’t care for the tigers. Scare her, those big cats."

Rosie had touched a nerve. Maybe his wife knew he was bad and couldn’t leave him but still refused to be around him in public.

Music began over the intercom—trumpet music as if announcing the entry of a king. At a proper circus this would be a live band, but here, in the Rothbury grandstands, music over the intercom was as good as it got.

Clowns streamed from the tent, bouncing, cart-wheeling and riding unicycles. In groups they took massive slingshots and launched rolled-up t-shirts into the crowd. Then at last they replaced the t-shirts with water balloons. One splattered just below Rosie and droplets of warm water streamed down her bare legs like small trickles of blood.

Patch chuckled and pointed at the stage. Clowns on camels rode out and pretended to race around. One fell and sprawled on the ground, causing much of the young crowd to laugh. The next act was a pair of sweater-wearing poodles who performed tricks and received twice as many cheers as the clowns and camels.

Gerard followed a cage onto the stage and Chloe was released. Rosie could've sworn the tiger glanced at her and did a double take. She would've loved to take that big cat home. Chloe was impressive, jumping through hoops and leaping over obstacles. She retired almost cheerfully to her cage, the most unnatural home for a giant cat.

Finally the elephants, five in total, marched onto the stage to the beat of music. They walked on two legs for a lap. One even climbed on top of the other two to form a small pyramid. Only cruelty would train such powerful creatures.

"Well. It's almost over. Better get back to work. Nice sitting with you." Patch glanced at the Slushy in her hand. "Don't let it go to waste." He leaned in close. "Don't forget to meet the elephants with Gerard.”

Patch tipped his blue cap and descended the stairs. At the bottom he waved and left.

Rosie wanted to drop the Slushy to the ground below, but worried she might ruin some kid’s night by showering him in red.

When it was all over she followed the crowd out, stopping at the concession stand to toss her full Slushy and buy another drink. The young

man glanced at her and then ignored her. "He's watching. Get the hell away."

Rosie felt her forehead warm. Patch? Was he watching her? She still needed to see more memories to have any proof that these men had killed Rachel. So far they were only guilty of animal cruelty, which was enough to condemn them in Rosie's mind. The elephants might be a good source. If she could find the German Shepherd, Hunter, he'd be the best.

Rosie nodded and made for the entrance to the race track. She followed a path to the tent where she'd met Gerard earlier. A cluster of clowns stood in a circle, most of them smoking. They eyed her as she approached.

"Gerard said I could see the elephants," Rosie said to a small red-haired clown whose make-up was sweating off so badly it made it look like her face was melting.

The clowns all paused and looked at her. Rosie's skin crawled and the hairs on her neck rose like the dead at the final trumpet's call.

"Get out of here," the clown spat.

"Rosie, dear," Gerard called.

At his voice the clowns dispersed, several giving her creepy looks with their painted on smiles and sad eyes.

"The elephants aren’t fit to be seen tonight." He stepped close to her and took her hand.

Rosie pulled away and adrenaline shot through her veins. "Don't touch me!"

Gerard held up his hands. "Not so friendly."

"I don't like to be touched." Rosie reached into her messenger bag and gripped the dagger she carried for protection.

Gerard stared at her in silence, his thorny eyebrows shadowing dark eyes. "I let you pet Chloe. Counts for something, doesn’t it?"

A low growl from somewhere in the tent. Rosie wanted to release the tiger and run. She'd surely protect her. Instead she turned and strode toward her car.

"Wouldn’t have been a very good lay anyhow," Gerard called.

Rosie clenched the dagger and continued forward. Patience. Patience. He'd get what he deserved. She made for her car, glancing back to see if Patch was following. If she would've messed around with Gerard, she'd

probably be dead already. She reached her car door and as she went to unlock it, two glossy eyes, not ten feet away, caught her attention.

A whimper. Hunter crept toward her and sat on his haunches as if inviting her to communicate. Once in a while an animal could sense her instincts, but it was rare.

Rosie placed her hand on the dog's head. She focused with everything she had and the cold that she'd never get used to traveled down her arm and to her fingertips.

Will you show me something? Rosie asked. Nothing happened for a moment and then the warmth overtook her body and everything faded to black.

She watched through Hunter's eyes as Rachel ran from Patch. He called for the dog to help him, but Hunter remained seated. When Patch caught Rachel, he threw her to the ground. He dragged her back to the tent where the dog stood in wait. Rosie could sense the dogs concern now, breathing heavily and wanting to attack.

Patch reached for something next to Hunter and the dog nipped. Patch took a baseball bat from the side of the tent and smacked the dog on the head. Rosie almost pulled out of the memory then, but she had to see the rest. Patch pulled Rachel to her knees and knocked her out cold with the bat. Then he dragged her body toward the woods. This was it. The part she had to see. The location she needed.

Hunter followed close behind. Within the forest was a run-down house with an exterior door down to the basement. Patch removed a key from beneath a rock, unlocked a padlock and brought the body below.

Rosie emerged from the memory, her heart pounding so hard she feared it might explode. Sweat ran down her back to form a cold blotch on her spine. Hunter shook off her hand and padded away. Rosie had enough to go to the police. If she remained and tried to find the abandoned house she might be the next body buried below. That was probably their plan all along if she would have stayed with Gerard.

She held the car door handle for a long moment before releasing. Many cars had left the parking lot. If she remained too long, her screams might go unnoticed. She had to act now. Rosie bolted down the road that led behind the race track where the body had been brought. She searched the forest for an opening and, with little trouble, found one.

The abandoned house was only about twenty paces from the edge of the forest. She pulled a small light from her purse and searched for the entrance to the basement. The house itself was moldering. The windows broken and shattered. The roof had caved in over nearly half the house. In back she found the cellar door. The rock and the key were right where Hunter had remembered. Rosie stuck the key into the rusted lock and it opened with a squeak.

She set it aside and pulled the doors open. A cold rotting smell wafted from below. Rosie shined her flashlight onto the uneven concrete steps, chipped and blackened. When she hit bottom, the scents of decay and rot strengthened. The room she was in was small and empty. To the right was a door. She shuffled toward the door and found a tattered sheet blocking her way. She pushed through and shined her light into the room. Corpses, some clothed skeleton, some covered in rotting flesh were strewn around the room. The sight brought vomit to the top of her throat. Most were laid awkwardly on chairs and musty furniture. Across the room was a bed and in front of the bed were the bodies of animals.

Rosie stepped over bones on her way to the bed. It was neatly made with a fully dressed skeleton on top of a quilt that at one time might have been colorful. The skeleton's left hand was on top of her heart, a diamond ring gleaming from the rays of the flash light. Patch was married. And here was his wife.

Noise from outside. Rosie began to panic to the point where breathing became difficult. She was trapped. The outside doors squeaked open. She dove behind an old dresser and extinguished her light. In the dark she heard someone enter, dragging something in the dirt. A low moan. The victim was still alive. Within ten paces, they stopped.

"I told you not to talk to anyone," Patch said.

A painful groan was the only response.

"Now you will keep Monique company."

A final moaning response was cut off by a loud snapping, the end of the boy.

Rosie tried to control her breathing. Tried to stop her heart from pounding so loudly. She might as well call out to him. Might as well give up. Maybe someone would investigate if she disappeared too. Or maybe not.

A light shone in front of her. She glanced down. Her own light was still off. She looked up. Cold eyes bored into her own.

"You should have left when I gave you the chance."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Rosie gasped.

"The Slushy would have made you ill. Made you leave for home. Now you've seen too much."

"But I won't—"

"Ah, but you will." He glanced toward the bed. "I had to do this. She was taken from me by a tiger. She needs company for when I'm gone. You'll love her." Patch stared at Rosie and then reached for her.

Rosie pulled the dagger from her purse and stabbed it though his hand. He recoiled in pain and she shot for the door. She felt his grip on her heel but she trudged up the stairs and into the night.

Hunter sprinted from the forest and plowed into Patch, who threw the dog into the side of the house. A loud yelp was all Rosie heard as she ran.

Patch was right behind her. She sprinted toward the circus tent. The only people left here might be tending the animals. She needed help.

Once into the dark tent she searched for someone. Anyone. It was as if they all knew to leave afterwards and stay away from Patch. They knew he was bad. A murderer. And none remained at the circus tent. A loud growl caught her attention. Chloe!

Rosie ran for the tiger cage. She shuffled her fingers over the wall next to the cage for keys but found nothing. Chloe growled. Rosie looked back. Patch was fast approaching with a pitchfork in his hand. She ran. Where? It didn’t matter. Soon, she'd be skewered.

A bellow caught her attention. The elephants. She ran toward the stalls and climbed over the gate of the big one who'd stared at her earlier. The elephant forced her to touch him and after a flash of cold, brought her into a memory.

Rosie watched through the elephant's eyes as Patch tied up and led a newborn baby elephant out of the tent. A primal scream met with the mother elephant's anger.

The world appeared around Rosie again. Patch was lowering himself over the gate.

"Step aside, you old cow," he said to the elephant.

As soon as he was within range, the elephant knocked him over and with one stomp, crushed his legs. Patch lay there screaming and Rosie

placed a hand on the elephant's leg. For a moment, Patch calmed.

Rosie smiled down at him. "Justice."

She pulled handcuffs from her bag and slapped them over his bloody wrists. Then she pulled out a gag, stuffed it down his throat and tied a cloth over his mouth. The elephant smashed open the gate for her and with all of her might she dragged Patch toward the abandoned house in the woods.

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"Before we meet, I want you to know, I’m a law abiding citizen and won't use evidence gained illegally."

"Okay. When can we meet?" asked the man on the other end of the phone.

"I work until six. I'll call you when I'm done." Rosie hung up and pulled her binder from her bag. She rolled down the windows to air out the car which smelled like wet dog—Hunter needed a bath tonight. She got out of her car and went around back, opening the trunk. She grabbed her bag, ready to provide hospice care to old Betty Lynn who was rotting away inside the house.

Rosie glanced at the small pile of necklaces, figurines and other trinkets shoved in the corner of her trunk. There were seventeen in total. Seventeen solved cases where justice was served. Next to the pile was her new favorite nostalgic item, a blue cap.
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THE NIGHTMARE CLOWN

Mathias Jansson

Standing under the lamppost
Staring at my bedroom
Dressed in terrible red
Horrible blue
Scary yellow
Screaming green
In his hand a bundle of balloons

When I crawl under the covers
Turn off the light and fall asleep
I hear the bang
The explosion of a balloon
My mind is filled with fear
The nightmare clown is here

His balloons are filled with nightmares
Bugs, snakes and spiders
Demons, monsters and witches
Sneaking into my room
as terrifying thoughts of horror

Most of all I fear the black balloon
Filled with my darkest dreams
Zombie clowns dressed as my mom
Laughing under my bed
Eating fried brain and eggs
With pink whipped cream…

COSTUME REPLICA

Kevin L. Jones

The air stank of geek. As far as the eye could see, Billy was surrounded by men and boys who had never kissed a girl and probably never would. As he elbowed his way through a sea of Klingons, Jedi Knights and various superheroes, he felt more than a little ashamed to be at this year's summer comic convention. Although he loved nerd things such as comic books, toys and especially horror movies, he did not consider himself to be one of them. He actually had a fairly attractive girlfriend and had been reasonably popular at the high school from which he had recently graduated. As he strolled around the dealer's room he drooled as he checked out the peddler's wares and wished that he had a million bucks. He could have easily spent it on the comics, toys and DVDs that surrounded him. He shifted the few acquisitions that he had thus far purchased from one hand to the other. He had bought a Norman Bates figure and a couple of DC Annuals which contained a bunch of old Batman reprints.

Then he caught sight of a booth that sold prop replicas. As he walked up to it he had to suppress a giggle. The man who sat behind the table looked like a real life version of the Simpsons' Comic Book Guy. As Billy scanned through the items that were for sale he saw Count Dooku's light saber hilt, a 1:1 scale blade from Puppetmaster and a Star Trek Phaser. Then he noticed a plain brown box. He asked the proprietor, "What's in there?"

The fat man smiled at his ignorance before responding, "Only an exact reproduction of a costume from one of the greatest horror films of all time."

He theatrically removed the lid. Billy could feel himself getting a nerd boner as he stared at what had been revealed to him, a perfect recreation of one of the costumes from Killer Klowns From Outerspace.

Billy blurted out, "How much?"

The fat man grinned at him. "Two thousand dollars!"

Billy groaned, "Shit, I'd like to buy it but I have to save my money for college."

The fat man placed the lid back on the box and grumbled as he sat back down, "Thank you for wasting my time, good day."

Dejected, Billy turned and slowly walked away. He'd never wanted a collectable more than that costume. Suddenly all the other objects around him no longer seemed desirable. If he couldn't have the clown costume he didn't want anything.

As he strolled out of the convention center and into the parking lot he tried to forget about the collectable that he wished to possess above all others but found that he couldn't. He got in his car and flopped down in the seat. As he looked over at the items that he'd bought a short while ago they seemed a poor substitute for the clown costume. He reached over, retrieved one of the Batman volumes and removed it from its Mylar plastic pouch. He began to read it and lost himself in the caped crusader's tale. Being engrossed in an old story about The Joker stealing a Pagliacci costume, he hardly noticed that the sun had begun to set. He looked up from his comic as he heard someone open the side door of the van next to him. He was grunting with effort as he loaded several boxes inside.

Billy snarled in disgust when he saw that it was the rude fat man. Fury built up as he saw him place the clown costume in the van. Billy began to mutter to himself over and over again, "It should be mine."

He grabbed the Mylar bag and exited his vehicle. He tapped the fat man on the shoulder and when he turned, Billy punched him in his stomach. As he wheezed for air, Billy grabbed a handful of his greasy black hair and threw him to the ground. As Billy straddled his struggling prone form the fat man let out a girlish shriek as he placed the Mylar bag over his face. He struggled weakly for a few minutes before he stopped moving altogether.

Billy stood gasping for breath. He couldn't believe what he had just done but, as he reached for the Killer Klown's costume, he smiled triumphantly. It had been totally worth it. He loaded his prize into his car and sped home, not caring that several people had seen him kill the fat man or that he had left behind the plastic pouch covered with his fingerprints. All that he knew was that he now possessed the greatest collectable ever.

When he arrived back at his apartment, he took his prize inside. He laid out the clown costume and stared at it wide-eyed. It was the most beautiful thing that he had ever beheld. He reached out and stroked the clown mask. His hand involuntarily recoiled as it came into contact with the costume replica. The head piece felt warm to his touch, almost like living flesh. Then Billy let out a frightened yelp as the clown suit began to stir and inflate itself. Then the impossibly moving headless thing sat upright. The

costume's grotesque white rubber clown hands crawled towards the suit and attached themselves in place. The hideous abomination then reached for the clown head mask and let out a mad otherworldly cackle as it finished putting itself together. The nightmare vision rose up and advanced on Billy. He wanted desperately to flee but was paralyzed with fear. The monstrous thing grasped him by the arm with one of its inhumanly strong latex hands. Billy struggled feebly to free himself but there was no escape. With its free hand the creature reached into its suit. Billy screamed in horror as the hideous clown produced a brightly colored ray gun. The terrified young man's cries were cut short as he was enveloped in an eerie red light.

A short time later when the police forced their way into Billy's apartment they were not sure what to make of what was inside. The detectives who arrived on the scene had seen many strange crimes over the years but nothing so bizarre as this. They found Billy's corpse hanging from the ceiling, cocooned in a ball of cotton candy. When Billy's body was pried loose from its candy tomb by the medical examiner he was found to be wearing a hideous looking clown costume. The medical examiner tried to remove the grotesque attire but couldn't. It had somehow become fused to the young man's skin. In death Billy would possess the costume that he had desired for all time.

UNCLE TICKLE'S X-TOBER HOLIDAY FUN, FUN, FUN, FUN

Ken L Jones

Now all of you have heard of what is spoken
Only in whispers about the true-life Pagliacci John Cano
Who once entertained a nation's children each day on live TV
Until after long drowning in a sea of debts and personal scandals
This fragile soul's tender mind shattered
And he settled all scores on his beloved network show
The body count and carnage were unprecedented and there were no innocents spared
Not even one in the huge audience of children that was there
And then Uncle Tickle after perpetrating his reign of revenge and terror
Escaped to do whatever he willed
Then for years uncounted he wandered America in zigzag patterns
Committing crime after crime
Each making less and less sense and with no pattern to all that dying
Now the few who ran into him and managed to walk away
Said he always did so in full costume and makeup
And he seemed to be rambling on as if still on his TV show
And all agree that this was because he was long wacked out
On drugs and booze with a heavy chaser of insanity because his mind was truly blown
Now of his most spectacular show pieces I'll bet that you know
But did you ever hear the one about the year that Uncle Tickle
Flipped Christmas the middle finger bird but just remember I told you so
What was strangest about all this so called Christmas special of his
Was that it took place on Halloween night
And he sent it out by a podcast after that on the net
And it was downloaded several million times
Now those who had analyzed him as they had long tried to catch him
Said that all this grew out of a Christmas special that he never got to do
But those who were still left standing who had once and had well known him
Opinioned that there was a different reason for this yuletide holocaust and this they swore was true

For when Cano was still Cano the beauty of Christmas meant everything to him
As a would be opera tenor its melodies and carols stirred deep things in his soul as yet undimmed
And since he always was such a thin-skinned and childishly sentimental fellow
All that was wonderful about the season soothed him and gave him peace like nothing else on Earth
So when everything reversed upon him and he became the mirror image opposite
Of all that his life and art were supposed to represent
I guess you could say that what he wanted to convey to the public made a kind of demonic sense
And just in case you've never seen it here in I will describe as best as poetry allows me
Christmas's strangest manifestation as it appeared on that long ago trick or treating night
Now in structure it was much like any cheesy and obvious December twaddle
That across the air that ever waddled
And perhaps that was meant to lure the unwary viewer to come and take a peek
But when it comes to Uncle Tickle and why he does things exactly
It's anybody's guess because the man's a total freak
Now first up was a short version of the Nutcracker Ballet
Which isn't odd because UT was such a culture maven
And so such high blown fare was always in his thoughts
But this was a version of this classic such as had never before been seen
For it was all performed by desiccated corpses that Uncle Tickle strung up from the ceiling
And operated as if they were puppets upon strings
Then the Night Before Christmas was recited by UT
Who wore a dirty and blood streaked Santa suit and beard
That he had taken off of a slaughtered department store Kris Kringle
That he had murdered somewhere
And around his neck he wore a necklace of human fingers and of ears
Now the poem was full of cuss words and was broken into at intervals

With threats he made against his long dead wife, his missing son,
And the several lawmen who still searched hard for him everywhere even yet
And the tree that he did standby was decorated with human hearts
That he made to beat still with aquarium pumps
Oh it was quite a work of art
Now through all of this whole affair it seemed as if
UT was talking to guest stars who weren't really there
And since many of them were characters from literature
Or ancient history it was all really quite weird
But the only other live body there was just a grade school boy
A hunchback who UT called Hunchie
Who was both his apprentice as well as his total pride and joy
Now to say the boy was mentally challenged was to understate the case
And no matter the brutality or carnage in which he did partake he always had a smile upon his face
And like Edgar Allan Poe's The Raven there was only one thing he ever said
And it was the greeting Merry Christmas that he slurred through
Swollen lips stuck at an odd angle on his too large head
Now all of this show was intercut with static and newsreel footage of atrocities too
And photos that Uncle Tickle had taken over the years of the awful things that he liked to do
And many was the dinner that came back up as all of this was viewed
Though I'm ashamed to say it had its advocates and aficionados too
Now where this all originally emanated from turned out to be the biggest surprise of all
For it was filmed in a forgotten fallout shelter across from a police station and it was under a city hall
And the audience that was still there long seated filled its discoverers all with dread
For they were all the corpses of missing children
Though no traces were ever found of their long vanished heads
Neither was any clue found to the whereabouts of the show's host or his young ward

Who followed UT everywhere and worshipped him as his savior and his lord
And all that was left behind was just a long poem scrawled in someone's blood
That left a message there and this is how it ended
His greeting left in grue which simply stated at its conclusion
"Look for an even more spectacular sequel next year
In Uncle Tickle's X-Tober Holiday Fun, Fun, Fun, Fun number 2"
And now almost a year has passed by since then and the clown is still at large
Doing all that he does best to bring about mirthful death and harm
And the public waits with bated breath to see what will come next
When Uncle Tickle rings in the holidays as he also wrings some necks.

BEHIND THE PAINTED SMILE
and other Clownish Flash Fiction

John H. Dromey

Behind the Painted Smile

What inspired the smile of *La Gioconda* as she posed for Leonardo da Vinci? Some art connoisseurs have surmised that Mona Lisa was suffering from indigestion; others have suggested pregnancy as the underlying cause for her facial expression.

No such ambiguity should be attributed to the painted-on smile of Barney Winston. His face was an open book—an illustrated tome that was easy to read—a happy clown face that was non-threatening to adults and tolerated by most children.

Barney liked to spread happiness around. He never worked in the same place twice. He showed up at crowded malls, entertained the passersby briefly and then moved on.

The first thing Barney did when he got home at night was to use generous amounts of cold cream to remove his clown makeup.

Underneath his painted smile there was a genuine smile.

Often that smile became even brighter as his female accomplice helped empty the pockets of his baggy trousers, removing the wallets and wristwatches she'd lifted from the spectators while they'd been distracted by Barney's antics.

Fishing Expedition

A novice screenwriter pitched his latest idea to a jaded producer.

"It's a fish out of water story about a new kid in school who's trying to fit in. There's teen angst aplenty…."

"Let me stop you right there. That theme has been done to death. I need something fresh and original."

"How about this? The point of view is that of the class cutup. That makes it a *clown* fish out of water story."

A-Hunting We Will Go

Sash was out of his element. He didn't speak the local language and he didn't look like the local people. He decided the only way he could move around town in daylight without attracting unwanted attention was to assume the guise of a street performer.

The outsider was sadly lacking in the skills of a mime or a juggler but, fortunately for him, there was a long tradition of comic entertainers who, when in character, communicated by honking a horn or blowing a whistle, notably, Harpo—one of the Marx Brothers—and Clarabell from *The Howdy Doody Show*.

For nearly a week Sash stayed out of sight and moved around freely only at night during which time he assembled a clown getup for himself. One evening he broke into a party shop specializing in Halloween costumes and attire for masked balls. Another time he surreptitiously visited a beauty parlor whose shelves and cabinets were filled with wigs and makeup. He even raided the closet of an Uncle Sam impersonator, appropriating the long striped trousers which were especially tailored to conceal stilts. Sash had to roll up the cuffs, of course, but otherwise the long legs were well-suited for covering the lower portion of his gangly frame.

Sash tried on his hodgepodge outfit and studied his image in a full-length mirror; he had to bend his knees to see the squirting flower on top of his hat, but he liked what he saw. He looked like a clown from head to ankle. He still needed appropriate footgear, however, to complete his ensemble. Going around barefoot simply would not do. In a thrift shop he'd located some shoes that were wide enough to accommodate his broad heels, but were too short overall. The oversized clown shoes in the costume shop had been too narrow.

The following evening Sash visited a shoe repairman at closing time and persuaded him to work late.

Sash used hand gestures to convey his instructions and intimidation to see that they were carried out. Shortly before dawn, the would-be clown slipped a big foot into each of the custom-made shoes. They fit. A disagreement over payment did not end well for the cobbler.

Looking every inch a clown, Sash was at last ready to use his keen sense of smell and superior visual acuity to stalk the hunter who'd had the audacity three weeks earlier to don a camo suit, apply paint to his face and hands and then enter Sash's neck of the woods on a bear hunt. The hunter

was also guilty of carelessness, or callousness, when he'd opened fire on an unseen creature moving through the underbrush.

Like the hunter, Sash was wearing camouflage suitable to the environment in which he sought his prey. Unlike the hunter, Sash—or Sasquatch to give him his full name—planned to use his bare hands to exact revenge for the fatal shooting of his mate for life. He'd already proved himself capable by his messy tearing apart of a cobbler, limb from limb, and that man's only offense had been asking for money.

Method Acting and Reacting

Overheard in the clowns' dressing room:

"Give your giggles a rest, why don't you? There's no need to stay in character *all* the time."

"I can't… *ha-ha-ha*… help myself. This new… *he-he-he-e-e*… ruffled collar tickles."

Post-Apocalyptic Detachment

"Clowns get no respect these days," a carnival entertainer lamented. "Even the zombie in the sideshow tent was holding his nose during our performance."

"Yeah," a second joker agreed. "And his other hand was waving around one of his ears. Why doesn't he throw them away? Sentimental, do you suppose?"

Number One Concern

Gelato was a cynical coldhearted clown who, in full regalia, daily removed the dust cover from an antique looking glass and recited, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall; who's the scariest of them all?"

"In the category of costumed rovers interacting with large crowds, you are," the mirror replied.

Time after time, Gelato was satisfied with the answer.

That went on for decades and then one day the mirror's response changed dramatically.

Before Gelato could say a word, the mirror spoke.

“You want to know who’s the scariest of them all. On a one-to-one basis someone whose path you’re going to cross soon. It’s *Exterminans*.”

“I’ve never heard of him. Is that somebody new?”

“No, he’s been around for ages, surely you’ve heard of him, but perhaps under a different name.”

“What name might I have heard?”

“The Grim Reaper.”

Phantom of the Glop Era

“You’re one scary clown with all those uneven lumps on your face and those psychedelic scarlet blotches. What kind of makeup do you need to get that effect?”

“I’m not wearing any. I was offered a promotional fee to try out a new brand, but I had an allergic reaction.”

Putting the Local Economy in High Gear

A newly-opened restaurant’s owner experienced some personnel problems.

“Whose idea was it to hire circus clowns to handle the valet parking?” he asked his assistant.

“Mine. What’s wrong?”

“At least ten of them pile into every car they park and then each and every one of them expects a gratuity.”

Love Is a Many Splintered Thing

While her father paced back and forth on the balcony with a loaded blunderbuss, Juliet sat in her boudoir, staring out of the open window, wondering when, if ever, she’d see Romeo again.

The answer was sooner than expected.

A huge papier-mâché clown head, towering four meters above the street, loomed into view. Juliet was startled. Her involuntary, but nonetheless ear-splitting scream brought her dad running. He took aim at the apparition and pulled the trigger, blowing a hole in its forehead and producing a fair amount of confetti.

A white-as-a-sheet Romeo peeked through the jagged opening and saw that Juliet's father was reloading. Frantically yelling instructions to the operators of the giant figure which was patterned after the *gegants* of Barcelona but much less well constructed, Romeo scrambled down through the rickety wooden support structure.

By the time Juliet's irate parent had the blunderbuss primed to fire a second time, the contraption encapsulating Romeo had turned tail and was lurching away.

Hoping to spare her beloved from harm, Juliet slapped the barrel of the gun downward. The discharged pellets shredded a portion of a thick board into toothpick-size splinters and propelled a significant number of them into the seat of Romeo's trousers so that, from behind, his midsection resembled a pincushion.

Did that indignity alienate Romeo's affections? Not in the least. In fact, he fell for Juliet in a big way—all over again—because the second blast from the blunderbuss had compromised the integrity of the struts that held the *gigante* together.

As he picked himself up from the wreckage—and prior to running away—Romeo cried out, "I've changed my mind. Parting is *not* as *sweet* as it's sometimes cracked up to be."

He and Juliet may have been star-crossed lovers, but before the night was over Romeo would be mooning a physician.

Cliché-Ridden Getaway

Somebody dressed as a clown robbed a bank. The employees notified the police with a sketchy description as soon as the perp had fled the scene on foot. The police dispatcher put out a BOLO with details based on her understanding of the usual MO of clowns—she'd been to a circus as a little girl and had been scared silly.

The robber changed his modus operandi by hiring an ordinary-looking driver and riding in the backseat of a sports utility vehicle with tinted glass. He got away because the cops were "on the lookout" for a tiny, brightly-colored car.

What Would Jack Do

With great expectations and no small amount of stealth a killer clown slipped out of his flat through the rear entrance. A few heartbeats later he went back inside to see what was on the telly. Even the Ripper would have had difficulty locating victims in *that* thick a fog.

Put on a Happy Face

A funeral home director was upset and wanted answers.

"I'm supposed to be on vacation, but my phone won't stop ringing. Customers are complaining day and night about the way their loved ones were treated. Did you check the credentials of the person you hired to apply makeup to our clients before their final viewing?"

"Yes. She had impeccable references."

"Where did she work before?"

"I don't remember; let me check. H-m-m… previous employers... the last place she worked? At a circus. Oh and here's a note I must have overlooked earlier: 'Her skills were highly prized by the clowns.'"

Symbolic Jesters

The Clown Prince of Elsinore was seeking some karmic relief.

"There's something *rotund* in Denmark," he soliloquized, adjusting the padding in his clown suit, "and I fear it may soon be me. Haunted by visions of scary painted figures from my early years, I have difficulty controlling my appetite. Although it's too soon to say for sure, I may have found a solution. I'll stage a backyard circus on the palace grounds. Child's play can be revealing."

"Would you like me to help you with your makeup?" a young woman asked him.

"Who are you?"

"I don't really know; I almost never get any billing. I'm a mere player."

He looked her over.

"You have a lean and hungry look and there's a bronze cast to your skin. Maybe you're *den lille Havfrue*—the little mermaid."

"I don't think so. I'm a starving actress and I may have overdone the spray tan, but I can't swim a lick. You can call me Lille, though, if you want

to. Do you need my assistance or not?"

"Sure, why not? What do you suggest?"

"I could use a character on a Toby mug for inspiration. What do you think?"

"Toby… or not Toby?"

"That is the question," Lille agreed.

"Okay."

After applying a base layer of pancake makeup, Lille piled on the toppings. Eventually, she stepped back to admire her work.

"Melancholy prints," she said.

"What did you call me?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking out loud. A nice finishing touch might be the addition of some painted-on artificial tears descending from one eye."

"Don't do it."

"Why not?"

"Spoiler alert! A sad visage would presage a tragic ending. There's more than enough foreshadowing going on already. For example, my girlfriend Ophelia is into method acting. She's spent so much time floating around in the lily pond the last few days she's wrinkled all over."

"Surely you're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not. When she's dried off and powdered she resembles a prune Danish."

With the Jury on Pins and Needles

The prosecutor confronted a hostile witness.

"Although Miss Payasa was wearing clown makeup when you informed her of her boyfriend's murder, you say she reacted with a concerned expression. How could you tell?"

"She was rubber-faced."

"Did she knit her brows?"

"No, she only knitted one. She purled the other."

As Bad as She Was Painted

After peering intently into a half-filled laundry basket, Cyril dumped the contents of his suitcase on top of the other dirty linen. Later, he confronted his wife.

"I wish you'd stop clowning around, Hermione, whenever I'm away."

"What makes you think I have been, Cyril?"

"There's greasepaint on your knickers."

FUNNY BONES

Ashley Pasco

I wasn't a big fan of graveyards. It's not that I believed in ghosts, I just didn't really care to be seen around the dead. There is something about graveyards and college students as a rite of passage. I didn't say it was smart, just that college students seem to like to test fate. It proves to them they are immortal in some way. Honestly, all it does it make them look young and inexperienced as they are. As I was.

There's an old tale about Funny Bones and apparently it's been around for quite some time. You're supposed to go to the graveyard on Halloween night and sleep on a grave. It can't be just any grave, your friends have to pick it for you and you sleep on it all night long. You can't leave and you can't take a break. Supposedly if you do leave the grave, nothing happens and you don't get a visit from Funny Bones. The lore is that you die once you see Funny Bones, but you don't know who or what it is until it's too late.

Hayley Cromwell high-fived me. She was my first best friend in college. We met last year, our freshman year, at orientation and have been hooked at the hip ever since. "You sure you're going to be able to do this, Erin?" she asked me, a grin present behind her eyes. She was enjoying this, I could tell.

"Of course! It's just some silly superstition after all." I wasn't overly excited about sleeping in a cold graveyard. It didn't matter how many blankets you had, a cold ground seeped into your bones. All my years of camping with my parents had taught me that. Really that's all this would be, camping without a tent.

"Now, we'll be there with you till midnight, but that's when we're supposed to scram. We can take Sarah's car, that way no one walks back." Madison, Hayley's best friend from high school, told us all. I wonder if Sarah knew she had been volunteered. She wasn't in on the conversation; she was in class which is where we should have been.

Later on that evening we were all piled into Sarah's car; Myself, Sarah of course, Madison, and Hayley. The drive to the cemetery wasn't that long. We could have walked, but there was the cold to contend with and of course issues of safety. We weren't completely reckless, only me for

agreeing to do it, to spend all night in a cold graveyard. If I was honest with myself, it was pretty crazy. We passed parents parading their kids around town dressed as fairies, grim reapers, Iron Man and the occasional Superman or Disney Princess.

After the seven mile drive we parked the car at the edge of the cemetery, just off the road, and unloaded all our gear. I had a sleeping bag, a fleece blanket and a thermos of hot coffee. I hadn't actually planned on sleeping. I was going to be wide awake and the coffee was going to help with that. I followed my friends through the graveyard, it was a fair size and I shuddered to think how far from the road we were. I didn't like complete isolation, that had me worried, but I wasn't allowed to pick the grave.

"Ah, what do you guys think about this one?" Hayley sing-songed.

"It's perfect!" Madison said giggling. "Just out of sight of the road and it looks old and creepy."

"Can anyone make out what the headstone says?" Sarah asked as she spread her blanket near it.

Hayley shone her flashlight on the stone. "Nope, the writing's too faded. It's like from 1818 or something like that. I can only barely just make out the numbers. I have no clue what the name is."

"We-l-l-l-l-l," Madison started. "Hayley, are you going to tell her the story or must I?"

Hayley spread her blanket out and sat down. We were all in a half circle with the headstone sealing it. She shone her flashlight underneath her face and giggled. "It feels like we're in the movie The Blair Witch Project." At that everyone laughed. She then turned off her flashlight and I heard her moving around trying to get comfortable.

"Just let me tell it," Madison said, sounding playfully annoyed.

"I got it!" Hayley said laughing. "Okay," she said, sounding serious. "So, the legend goes that every Halloween one of Crestor's College students spends the night at a gravestone and cannot leave until first light. Now no one actually knows what Funny Bones is or who. But you have to say this chant exactly right:

Funny Bones, Funny Bones
Show yourself, don't be afraid
Funny Bones, Funny Bones
I won't leave till you appear

Funny Bones, Funny Bones
Come join me at this grave

*"*Once you do this then you'll just wait quietly or sleep. Either is fine, though if you go to sleep it's said that Funny Bones shows up faster."

I looked at Haley with slight annoyance. "That sounds like something a kid made up, or maybe you made it up. Since it's called Funny Bones, shouldn't it at least be a ghost or a skeleton? Anything to do with bones?"

She laughed. "You can believe what you want, but it's true. What do you think happened to that guy from last year?" She snapped her fingers and squeezed her eyes shut as though that would help her remember.

"Wasn't his name Paul Towers? He was that freshman from Gleeson Hall that spent the night here last year. He disappeared. No one ever found him," Madison interjected.

"Wait, how do you know he spent the night here?" Sarah asked, sounding slightly scared.

"Because all his stupid friends were bragging about it like it was an honor he died or something," Hayley finished. "Seriously, didn't you hear Chase Davis running around telling everyone? I swear I overheard that story at least five times. He'd tell it to anyone who'd listen."

"Are you sure we should be asking Erin to do this?" Sarah asked, hugging her blanket a bit closer to her.

I laughed, pretending to be amused for Sarah's sake. "Really, it's fine. I'm not chickening out now. Besides, it's just some stupid story. I'll prove it to you all when I wake up freezing ass cold in the morning. It'll be a story to tell my children and children's children."

"So has anyone ever even written down anything about this Funny Bones, or has it just been passed on through generations like other stories?" Sarah asked, sounding a bit better, but her voice still quivered slightly.

The hours passed as we sat there and chatted. The plan was for me to stay the night in the graveyard and someone would be back to pick me up first thing in the morning. When it came to the time for them to leave I helped them gather their stuff. We all hugged and laughed and said our 'goodbyes' and I heard my fair share of 'good lucks.' I watched them leave and sat back down on the cold, hard ground. Suddenly, I wished I was a trick or treater, or back in my dorm room. It was actually pretty creepy without any street lights to see my way around. The only light came from

two headstones a bit back from where I was. They added a ghostly haze because of the light fog that was slowly rolling in.

I wrapped my fleece blanket tightly around me and crawled into my sleeping bag and zipped it up to my waist. I was too chicken to actually lie down. Finally, I forced myself to say the stupid chant and my voice wound up sounding scared and small in the large graveyard. Without having a watch I had no idea what the time I was. I knew it was after midnight, but the exact time I couldn't know. I started to drink my coffee and kept an eye on the darkness at the same time. I could only make out shadows. I tried not to look towards the tombstones with the lights because that seriously just gave me the heebie-jeebies.

I waited what seemed like forever and nothing happened, not a thing. I was just sitting in this terribly creepy place with terribly creepy fog. Mostly, I was just cold so I bit the bullet and shoved myself all the way in my sleeping bag, making sure that I was nice and toasty. I pulled the sleeping bag over my head to breathe into it like when I was a kid to help make extra heat. I slept much more comfortable that way.

I woke with a start. I heard something and sat up straight as a board. The lights were no longer shining on those headstones. That scared the crap out of me. I shivered from fear as I looked around me, I didn't see anything but what I felt was out of this world. Something breathed into my ear. I wished I could have blamed it on the wind, really I did. But the air was warm in my ear. I heard the distinct word, "Leave." I jumped up as something coarse and bony touched my back. Stumbling out of my sleeping bag, I fell forward hitting my head on the 1818 headstone, my phone – I forgot I had - gripped in my hand. Instinct took over and my hand grazed the top part of my head. I felt warmth. *Blood.*

Before I knew what was going on, I was running as fast as my uncoordinated legs would allow me. It would have helped if I wouldn't have kept falling over and scratching myself on everything. Exhaustion took over and tears were sliding out of my eyes from the frigid air. I slumped against something and tried to slow my ragged breathing. I kept hearing the word 'leave' being yelled all throughout the cemetery. My heart was beating with a fierceness I didn't know it could.

I stood up and tried to get my bearings, but that simply wasn't possible. I had no light, no phone -I must have dropped it somewhere- and no idea where I was in the graveyard since I'd never even seen it before

tonight. Moving over to my left a bit, I stumbled onto something that felt like metal and then I felt something crumble beneath me and I was falling. I landed hard and the breath was knocked from my lungs and then I lost consciousness.

When I finally came to, my head felt like it was being fried with lightning bolts and flashes of light went across my vision. I closed my eyes to stop it. Excedrin would be good about now, I thought. Opening my eyes and looking up I realized I'd fallen into a grave because it felt about six feet down. And it felt like the perfect size for a coffin. I pulled myself to my feet and felt around to see if I could get any kind of foothold in. Pushing my hands into the clay-like substance I began to dig, trying to make a way for me to climb out. There was no way I was finishing up my night in a grave. It wasn't happening.

By the time I managed to crawl out of the grave, my entire body was covered in clay and mud. It still wasn't light and I couldn't see a thing. My head continued to pound, but the flashes of light were getting less frequent. I heard something from behind me and spun around to see a whole group of shadows taller than the headstones. I screamed and took off running again. I tripped and fell face first into the dirt, only my hand came into contact with something hard and moveable. It felt like flesh. If I had been able I'd had screamed again but all I could do was roll over and something felt like it moved with me. Terrified, I flung myself upwards and wiped the sweat off my face, only to realize it wasn't sweat and my hand was covered in something rank and feathery.

Gagging, I wiped my hands off on my jeans and tried not to vomit. If this was someone's idea of a practical joke, it had ceased being funny. And then I smelled it, it smelled different. It smelled like death and bit of vanilla. I was gagging again, unable to help it because the putrid odor was invading my nostrils and sealing itself in my sensory memory. I felt it too, it touched my arms and no matter how much I wanted to run, I couldn't. I was blocked in by a casket and headstones and another fresh grave. My heart felt like it stopped beating. And then I heard my stupid, horrendous prose being repeated back to me with subtle differences.

Funny Bones, Funny Bones
I am here, don't be afraid
Funny Bones, Funny Bones

You won't leave
Funny Bones, Funny Bones
I've joined you at this grave

I turned around in a blind panic, only to see nothing. There was nothing there! I backed up and bumped into what I hoped was a tree. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest and I'd literally had enough. Forget the stupid dare. I wasn't staying in this graveyard another minute. I was going to walk back to my dorm and take a much needed shower and crawl into my comfortable bed. I didn't give a crap about my blanket or my thermos. Those could be replaced. I also didn't care if my friends laughed at me or called me a chicken for the rest of my college experience. All I knew is this was it and I'd had enough, nothing was worth this.

Trying to find my bearings, I realized the graveyard was much bigger than I'd anticipated. Closing my eyes, I listened for the road. Even though it was late, I was bound to hear a vehicle or two. *Nothing*. I wanted to scream out of frustration. But, what good would that do? I heard the sound of laughter and turned towards it because it sounded oddly familiar. I also heard my name. Walking quietly towards the sounds, I listened.

"Do you think the tape recorder scared her?" That was Hayley. I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

"Probably. Did you put the ketchup and plastic bird where I told you?" And that was Sarah.

"Yes, you only told me where to put it five times. What about that vampire coffin you borrowed from the drama department? I forgot where you said you where putting that, Hayley." That voice belonged to Madison.

"I put it near that tree and Paul Towers' headstone. It was near the freshly dug grave," Hayley answered her with laughter.

"Shhhh, we don't want her to hear us," Madison interjected.

I watched the three of them as they made their way through the graveyard, oblivious to the fact that I was following them.

"Do you think she believe that story about Paul Towers?" Sarah asked quietly.

"It sounded really convincing to me so I don't see why she wouldn't have," Madison said. "I'm nothing if not creative."

I couldn't help myself, I was pissed off. Why? Because my friends had played some huge elaborate joke on me and because of them I had a

head wound and a headache to boot. What kind of friends did this to someone? I couldn't even see straight I was so angry. Honestly, I had thought about just walking away and leaving them there to wonder what happened to me and let them be scared. It would serve them right. I was drawn to them when I heard a blood curdling scream.

With slow and deliberate steps I made my way towards them. They were running and ran right past me. I tried to holler out to them to let them know I was fine because they ran like I had run. I just kept walking towards where they had been and I realized how soon dawn would be here. It meant I'd be walking anyway. I had half a mind to call a cab, when I was once again reminded I'd lost my phone. I was pretty sure I'd dropped it in my original attempt at running.

I got closer to where I'd been at the start of the whole night and realized I'd be able to get my sleeping bag and thermos after all. That was until I looked down and saw a body. At least I was pretty sure it was a body. I took note of the blond hair, red coat and faded blue jeans. What really tipped me off was the cell phone clutched in the hand. I tried to reach for it, but realized I couldn't touch it, couldn't even feel it. There was blood on the headstone that read 1818. I knew it was my blood and I knew the body was mine.

Anger coursed through me with a new meaning. I was dead. My best friends had killed me with their stupid practical jokes. If they wanted a Funny Bones, well they had one now, only I wasn't going to stay at the graveyard. I began to fade with dawn, but somehow I knew at night I'd be back. I had unfinished business as Funny Bones and I knew three girls who were about to get the fright of their life and it all started with a little chant.

CRAZY CLOWN

David Frazier

His painted smile hid the blood
Of those he consumed raw
Uncooked remains of those killed
By a lunatic clown
Escapee from the asylum
Crazy as a bedbug

Killing along the way
Eating them for dinner
No fires needed
Slice, chew and swallow
Hearts still pounding
As he ate

“Followed blood trail to your door”
Police said
I'm going to hide under a bed
Or somewhere cold
Likes liver, I'm told
Damn, it's cold in this freezer

I hear him banging, rummaging
Through my things
Hoping he doesn't open freezer door
Quiet stillness, door thrown open
Screaming in shock and disbelief
I die, another victim.

PAYBACK

Marietta Miles

April swished her hips to the left and then curved them to the right. She closed her green eyes and pondered on the music drifting from the tent behind her. She was a few steps away from being a woman and had to move gently so as not to drop her heavy get-up. With a grand gesture she swept open the red velvet curtains, peeked through her lashes and saw the eager eyes of the town's menfolk. She fought the urge to cross her arms and cover herself. She was not accustomed to this type of attention. April was filling in for Cleo the Harem Girl who was laid up after laboring with her second baby.

April closed her eyes again but kept the curtain wide. The frenzied line stretched past the main tent announcing Klein's Comedy and Circus. The waiting men smelled of liquor, sawdust and sweat. They herded past April and stared straight ahead. Inside, the platform was lit with lanterns and two ladies stood still in the middle. When the calliope really picked up and the men were near to the stage, the girls' slinky silver robes dropped to the floor. The men hollered out, the sound ringing like a dinner bell. April took a quick moment to wave at her sister June who was now beginning to wiggle and gyrate. April knew June couldn't see her.

"But just in case," April whispered. She closed the curtain, hung her head and walked to the wagon she and her sister shared.

"What's up, chicken butt?" April's best friend Jazz smiled at her as she went by.

"Mr. Jazz!" April was always glad to see him. He made her laugh. If this carnival family had a father it was most certainly Jazz. He was born in the circus, the son of an acrobat and a sledge driver. Jazz could have been the strong man but he chose to run with the funnies. He liked to paint his face and go undercover, as it were. When he was a child, he had a nasty run-in with a double boiler in the hot concessions tent. Jazz never liked it when people looked at his face after that.

"We're heading over now. I left you a little something special on your desk, itty bit." He ruffled April's soft hair and pretended to pull a coin from her ear. April pretended to take the coin and jump for joy. "Don't you and I wish, little girl. Coins coming from our ears, wooo hooo. See you at

the yard once you're all done." He turned to leave. April knew he was tired, his day started so early. But for now he had pep in his step. "Enjoy your surprise," he called to her.

April ran like the wind to her wagon. On her small cyphering desk was a tall glass of lemonade. She usually worked late so by the time she was done with her day, the lemonade stand was done as well. The old woman who ran it had to check her money in and clean out the tubs before heading down to the yard with the rest of the troop. The carnival met every performance night at the dance tent. Jazz knew how much April liked lemonade. She would head back after she changed and chugg her treat.

April pulled a ragged clothes roll from under the kip. She unfolded a pair of soft pants, flannels, wool socks and a newsboy. Evelyn "Crab Girl" Monarch had a son about April's age. He was a norm. They were happy to share their clothes with April and her sister. The first thing she removed from the silly costume was her veil. It tugged on the red beard she hid underneath. Once the veil was on the floor, next to her sister's everyday clothes, April scratched and rubbed her chin. She took off her slip and nearly jumped into her trousers, it was getting chilly. She looked at a near hanger and stared at June's undergarments. People thought April was a freak with her soft ginger beard but it was poor June who had to live with the eyes of panting men constantly ogling her figure.

Feeling like her old self again April jumped from the wagon and quickly made her way to the rest of the troop. She could see they were huddled around a fire can. Several of them leaned against the old, useless cannon. "Human Bullet" D'Amato, such a gentle old man, had passed away the previous season but the cannon, like everything in carnival life, had a purpose. As April approached her friends she began to skip. This was the best part of the night, when the townies left them alone and the company could be themselves. April looked up to the sky and smiled.

"Watcha looking at, boy?" A red-faced little man stopped April in her tracks. "Seen you coming from the red headed girl's place. You kin?" The man was a broken fifty, not much taller than April and smelled worse than the horses. He gripped her shirt and started to pick her up by the collar. "I'm gonna get close to that little buff," the drunk was talking about June. "Yup, when she's done dancing for them," he looked toward the cooch tent. "Make her dance fer me and maybe even on me," he cackled and spit. "You'd like that too, huh? Ya little dawg!" The old man jabbed at April's

crotch, rough-housing cause he thought she was a boy. There was nothing between her legs and the man drew his hand back quickly. “Ohh, hoooo what we got here?” He grabbed at her breasts, laughing like a wild dog. April shoved him out of her way and skirted behind the tents. The old man stumbled after her, wandering and tripping up. When he found the midway empty he stumbled back to where the dancing girls were just about to finish their show.

April was gulping air and coughing when she settled next to the rest of her gang, then shouldered her way close to Jazz. His fuzzy yellow wig was crumpled in his hands and the fake flowers he carried for the show were on the ground beneath his big painted boots.

“What you nervous ‘bout, girl?” Jazz asked. He looked into her darting eyes. His face was still colored white; black rimmed his eyes and bright red grease paint showed through in certain spots. Around him the younger clowns were in full costume, waiting in the wings.

“Naw, nothing really,” she answered. “I’m okay, Jazz. She nervously pulled on her beard. Shorty, the strong man and wagon driver, ran around the side of the tent.

“Alright yawls,” he stopped in their midst. “Mr. Klein said it was fine. We made enough money tonight.” Mr. Klein was owner and manager of the carnival. April could almost picture the bald-headed man counting his money and chomping on an ancient cigar. He mostly stayed in his wagon and only spoke to Shorty. Klein didn’t pay very well but he provided for the gang and didn’t judge their carnival way of doing things. Shorty took another deep breath. “But we got to leave tonight. He says we can’t wait till morning,” he waved his hand in the direction of the owner’s wagon. “Too much heat, he says.”

“Well, alright.” Jazz liked the news and laughed out loud.

The girls from the dancing tent came out the back slash. The crew could see and hear the natives wandering out of the tent and meandering away from the carnival. June pulled her robe tightly against her figure as she walked quickly to join the group. When she stopped next to him, Shorty put his coat around her shoulders. June was holding her high heels and wore her old work boots.

“Aw, Shorty, you are always a sweetheart,” June smiled at him. He grinned and looked at his shoes.

“I say,” Jazz started. “Since April was sent in as ringer at the dancing tent and all, we let her do the pickin’ tonight.” He put his hands on April’s shoulders and patted her like a proud papa bear. Everyone else agreed. June came over and gave April a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

“You sure are growing up, little sister,” she smiled sweetly.

“Here ya go, darlin’,” Jazz handed April the long handled buck knife he kept in his boot. He was always ready for trouble. “You tell us who it’ll be tonight, little girl.”

April took the knife by the blade and flipped it so the handle landed in her palm. It was clear she had been spending time with the knife thrower, Adele. April gazed and considered all the men who were leaving. Most were wandering in groups, like drunken schools of fish. Almost off property, near a thicket of brambles, she spied the man who had put his hand between her legs, the man who planned to do bad things to June. April lifted the knife and pointed to him.

“That one,” she whispered and turned to the group. “He’s the one we’re gonna do,” and she smiled brightly.

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Clyde Davis had done one too many foot longs. He bent over, put his hands on his knees, and attempted to lose a few on the side of the road. Fact was he didn’t know if it was the hot dogs or the strawberry moonshine that made his stomach angry. No matter, his good for nothing friends left him and his wife, Dora, was gonna be pissed. Clyde broke into a sweat and grew dizzy. The dogs were coming up fast. He sat down hard on the ground. He waited in the soft moonlight for the world to stop spinning.

Just ahead, not five feet away, Clyde eyed a play of shadows. He looked at the dark tree line, the vacant road and finally spied a tall shadow. The legs stretched long and spindly and it cradled something against its darkness. Without warning, the shadow dropped to the gravel and scurried towards Clyde, moving like a spider. Clyde’s mouth went dry, his stomach came up and he squealed like a stuck pig. A bright light broke across his face and Clyde stared into the black eyes of a ghost. Then he realized it was not a ghost but a clown, a clown painted black and white. The clown held his finger to his lips to hush Clyde’s noise and smiled wide with yellow stained teeth. Clyde lost his mind and fainted.
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Clyde felt a cool breeze go over his entire body. He shivered at the feeling. Even before he opened his eyes he knew that he was naked. When he looked at the ground in front of him he saw a young man with large pointy ears rifling through his pants. The boy made a growling sound in the back of his throat and scooted away. Clyde tried to grab him but realized he was tied to a broken wagon wheel. His legs and arms could not move. An old handkerchief was stuck in his mouth and secured with a leather bit.

There was a large fire in front of Clyde. On the other side were several ugly freaks. They were laughing and talking, their faces contorting. Two of the bigger men had thick black gloves on and they stoked the bright, hot flames. He saw the cooch girls and the little bearded weirdo, too. Clyde saw the old cannon pushed close to the fire, muzzle low and stretched across the flames. Hanging from the mouth of the muzzle was a big boiling pot. Clyde's eyes were never any good but he couldn't mistake the black bubbles of tar popping on the surface. The spirit clown with fuzzy yellow hair shuffled past with a wicked smile. He dropped a sack of white feathers and stuffing on the ground near the troop. Clyde's heart jumped and then stopped. His lungs forgot to breathe. He squeezed his eyes shut to clear the tears that were falling. And behind his bit Clyde shrieked like a man on fire.
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A CLOWN WITH AN AXE WALKS INTO A CHURCH…

James Pratt

"A clown with an axe walks into a church…"

Sounds like the start of a bad joke, right? And that would be appropriate. There's nothing funny about clowns. I mean, think about it. They're painted up like dead prostitutes. They purposefully mess up whatever they're trying to do because the whole point of a clown is to spread chaos. If madness had a face, it would be the eerily goofy, makeup-smeared face of a clown. What was it Lon Chaney said? Oh yeah. 'There's nothing funny about a clown in the moonlight'. So imagine my surprise at the way things turned out when I finally met a clown.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Before the clown, there was the Incident. After that, things really got weird.

When the Incident happened and those *things* started coming through, seeping into our reality through the cracks between worlds or dimensions or whatever like cockroaches scurrying out from beneath a refrigerator, I was away on a business trip hundreds of miles from home. The first thing I did when I realized the emergency broadcasts weren't some sort of movie promo or elaborate hoax was to call Amy and make sure she and Tyler were okay. Amy sounded shaken but was holding it together. She said she was going to take Tyler to her dad's farm a few miles out of town, which was the safest place she could think of.

"I love you, Davis," was the last thing she said to me. The phones have been dead for weeks now and I haven't talked to her since.

As for me, I had the same idea as a bunch of other people and headed for the nearest church. I was in the South which is Baptist country. The nearest house of God happened to have the name Dead Horse Creek Baptist Church. It was a little hypocritical of me, I admit. I've considered myself an agnostic for a long time; in other words, an atheist who hasn't worked up the courage to take the final plunge. I used to mock religion back in the old days. The idea of a kind and loving God in the context of such a messed up world, full of unnecessary suffering and petty cruelty and unspeakable wickedness just seemed absurd.

I have my faith back now. There's a God for sure. The only problem is He's insane.

In the beginning, there were almost thirty of us. In the space of maybe a month that number was whittled down to five. Every time we went scavenging for food, those things would be waiting to pick us off one or two at a time. The last one to die before we left the church forever was Mitch something, a used car salesman whose last name I can't remember. A couple of us were in the ruins of a supermarket that had already been picked almost clean when one of the things just *unfolded* from thin air. It was a shapeless, tumorous mass the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. It never touched the ground but seemed to ooze through the air. Worse than hideous, it was just wrong; fuzzy and indistinct, it was like an image from an antique television come to life. I wondered what it would feel like to touch the thing, if my hand would pass right through it like it wasn't there at all. The thing dripped filth, *was* filth and, before anybody could move, it was on top of Mitch, dissolving and absorbing him bit by bit until there was nothing left. Mitch's insides spilled out as his flesh sizzled and bubbled like butter on a skillet. And then the thing started to eat. Even as Mitch was devoured he was changing, becoming like one of *them*. He screamed and flailed with mutant appendages more like tentacles than human limbs as his liquefied parts were greedily slurped up by the thing through its many toothless orifices.

The other way our numbers dwindled was due to the H-Virus. Terry Feinstein, the guy who theorized the nature of the virus, suggested the name "delayed spontaneous hyper-dimensional mutation phenomena" but we ended up going with H-Virus instead. Terry was a book editor and would-be sci-fi writer and, as far as I was concerned, his theory was as good an explanation as any.

Here's the lowdown on the H-Virus. A couple of times after a close encounter with one of those things, hours or days later somebody in the group would start screaming and thrashing like they were on fire. Their bodies would contort and swell as the cosmic polyp building up inside then began to leak out and then erupt from every orifice. Skin stretched to the limit, they would finally split open like an overstuffed sausage and their insides would come spilling out. But that wasn't the end of it. Death would have been too merciful. The process was actually a terrible transformation that changed them into a boneless heap of living cancer. They would lash out at everything around them with flailing tendrils that used to be their limbs and intestines, crushing and strangling anything they could catch. The

worst part was that their still-human heads would be screaming the whole time.

Terry theorized that the things are from a far-off place with more spatial dimensions than the three-dimensional world we occupy (four, counting time), or maybe from another universe entirely. It was possible, Terry thought, that the things carried a “pocket” of their own reality with them; if you came into contact with that pocket, you could become infected with the essence of that other place. You would become like them.

Somebody suggested calling it the “H-Virus”, the “H” standing for “hyper-dimensional”, and the name stuck. Terry was the second person to contract it and he killed three people before somebody managed to get close enough to smash his head in with a crowbar. For some reason he screamed the name “Maria” the whole time. I asked around afterward and nobody knew who Maria was. I guess we never will.

Then came the night I met the clown. Like I said, at that point we were down to five. They were:

There wasn’t a lot to do in the church. One of the ways we passed the time was speculating what the Incident, which was really just another name for Armageddon, really was. I even remember the conversation we were having the night the clown showed up.

“You heard about CERN?” Sam asked. “Those guys were using a particle accelerator to try and recreate the Big Bang. Why the hell would somebody want to do that?”

Emily shook her head. “Mmm, I’m not sure that’s what they’re trying to do.” She was the only one that could contradict Sam and not expect a bitingly sarcastic response. “I think they’re just looking for undiscovered particles and things like that.”

Sam snickered. “Were looking for undiscovered particles. Anyway, it looks like they got more than they bargained for. Maybe this is God’s way of telling us to back off. There are just some things Man wasn’t supposed to know.”

Julia shook her head. “They couldn’t recreate the Big Bang. How can you recreate something that never happened?” She firmly believed the world was six to eight thousand years old, humans had once shared the planet with dinosaurs, that God was still in Heaven and that everything happening was all part of His much touted but vaguely defined master plan.

People never ceased to amaze me. How could an otherwise rational person hold onto such beliefs despite the preponderance of scientific or even anecdotal evidence to the contrary? Then again, I believe in gravity even though I've only seen the phenomena attributed to it, as opposed to gravity itself. Maybe belief of any sort is an act of faith.

"It's the Armageddon," Julia explained. "Those things out there are obviously demons. How much more proof do you need?"

"Those things don't look like any demon I've ever seen," I pointed out.

"How many genuine demons have you seen?" she calmly replied and she had a point. Considering that the things had never tried to get into the church, she might have even been right.

"I don't think it has anything to do with CERN," Emily said. "I don't think human beings could cause something like this, not with the current level of technology." Emily was a physics major in college, she explained how dimension-spanning wormholes were an accepted phenomena in the strange reality of quantum mechanics and that maybe some unknown force had caused a wormhole to expand beyond its normal subatomic limits and encroach into the macroscopic world. That in turn could have theoretically created a doorway between our universe and another with one with a very different set of physical laws.

Personally, I thought and still think that Julia was half right. This was a sort of Armageddon, but not the one predicted by any modern religion. I think God was overthrown and not by the devil. If that was the case, things would be a lot more… I don't know, biblical. No, this is something different. I think God was overthrown by something unknown, something so alien we couldn't even begin to understand it. Something from beyond any framework or context we could comprehend, from… *outside.*

"I miss the others," Julia said out of the blue. "This place feels so big an empty without them."

I shrugged. "On the other hand there're plenty of parking spaces." I was sort of flirting with her. It wasn't like I planned to cheat on my wife, which I only come close to doing once but didn't go through with it. It's just that she was cute and, being a typical heterosexual male, I couldn't help but wonder what she'd be like in bed. That, plus my modest history of sexual partners didn't include any Mexicans, or Puerto Ricans, or whatever Julia was so I was doubly curious.

“More food for us,” Sam said matter-of-factly.

Emily shook her head. “Real nice, Sam.”

He shrugged. “So? It’s true. You can’t tell me you haven’t thought the same thing.”

And he was right. I’m ashamed to admit it now but I had thought the same thing. You don’t realize, I mean really realize, how fast you go through food until it starts to become scarce. And food was becoming scarce. I hadn’t even taken a week for things to start spoiling. We weren’t the only terrestrial things, two-legged or otherwise, out there looking for something to eat. The drugstore across the street had already been looted. The small supermarket a few blocks down the road, which at one time had seemed like a veritable cornucopia, was filled with the stench of decay. There had even been a couple of times when I’d seen Sam staring at Joey and having whispered arguments with his sister.

Hungry or not, we knew what was out there waiting for us. All the people that usually volunteered for scavenging missions were dead, dissolved by those things or destroyed by the H-Virus and so that conversation, like so many before it, quickly degenerated into an argument over who should go scrounging for food.

“I went last time,” I said.

“Oh, you’re keeping track now,” Sam replied.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact I am.” And I was.

“I’ll go,” Julia said. Joey grabbed her sleeve. He hadn’t said a word since his mom died, nor had he been away from Julia’s side.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

“No.” I shook my head. “No way.”

“Why not?” Emily asked. “Because she’s a helpless female?”

Emily ran hot and cold, but I couldn’t believe she was turning this into a feminist thing. At least that’s what it sounded like to me. Without a political or social framework in which to exist, I didn’t think political and social concepts applied anymore. Philosophy was a luxury generally reserved for cultures not under attack by alien monsters from Dimension X.

I tried to be get along with Emily because I figured I’d need her on my side if and when things finally came to a head with Sam, but I’d already bitten my tongue so many times I was surprised it hadn’t fallen off. “Okay, then why don’t you take a turn?”

“I…I sprained my ankle the last time,” she mumbled.

“Really?” Sam asked. “You never said anything.” Because his sarcastic and sincere tones were exactly the same, I couldn’t tell whether he was concerned or just being facetious. He really did have a weird relationship with his sister. Roderick and Madeline Usher weird.

Emily blushed. “It wasn’t bad. I just don’t think I’d be able to run if I had to. Or be able to carry much.”

“I said I’d go,” Julia repeated and started to get up.

I rose. “No, I’ll go.”

“I know why you’re being so chivalrous,” Sam said with a grin.

“Why’s that, Sam?” I replied. Normally I would have ignored him, but not that night. In retrospect, I think we were both looking for a confrontation. Sam wanted to secure his position as the alpha-male whereas I just wanted to hit something.

Sam nodded toward Julia. “Because you want to screw her.”

“What the hell is your problem?” I demanded in my most indignant voice. Tracking Julia out of the corner of my eye, I saw her wince.

His face the picture of innocence, Sam shrugged. “Am I wrong? I thought I was sensing something going on with you two. Is she not your type?”

In my mind’s eye I saw a younger Sam; lean, perfect hair, sweet-talking his way into teachers’ hearts and pretty girls’ pants. Not the best or the brightest, but certainly the most confident. Even then, he was a big fish in a small pond. Being the most important person in the room wasn’t just his hobby, it was his whole identity. What he was doing wasn’t an act of bravado but desperation.

“Shut up, Sam,” Emily said, sounding a bit frightened as well. Maybe she figured if Sam went over the edge, he’d take her with him. “Just let it go.”

“You shut up!” he shot back. That was the first time I’d heard him talk to her like that. It was the first time I really wondered if Sam might be losing it.

“You know what?” Sam went on. “I’m sick of this crap. From now on it’s every man for himself.” He looked at Emily. “Sorry. Or woman. Whatever I find, I keep. Satisfied?”

I shook my head. “Man, Sam. You just get classier every time you open your mouth.”

Sam stood up, fists clenched. “Want to do something about it?”

So there I was, about to get into a fistfight with the mayor of a small town in the middle of a church while the world was dying around us. It couldn't get any weirder than that. Or so I thought.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

Everyone froze.

"What was that? Julia whispered.

I looked toward the far end of the room. "I think somebody's at the door."

"What should we do?" Emily asked.

"Let them in," I said. The walls were closing on me. Truth be told, I was just as much on the edge as Sam. I needed a distraction or I'd lose my mind. Whether that distraction might be an inter-dimensional horror was beside the point.

"Are you crazy?" Sam snorted. "How do you know it's not one of them?"

Julia glared at Sam. "I'm pretty sure they don't knock on doors."

Her voice oozed contempt, something I'd never heard in her tone before. Even Joey gave her a curious look. The tension was getting to Julia too. We were all ready to explode.

"Fine!" Sam cried, gesturing wildly at that point. "Then you go answer it."

Emily stood trembling behind Sam. "Maybe they'll just-"

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

"I'm going to let them in," I said. Julia took my hand. "Davis…"

"It'll be okay," I said, adding "It's not like it could get any worse." I was lying, of course. Deep down, I think I actually hoped it was one of those things come to end our suffering. I did hesitate before moving the iron rod we used to wedge the door shut. In that moment of hesitation, I realized I'd much rather face whatever was on the other side of that door than return to the insanity behind me. Sliding the bar free, I stepped back then pushed open the door.

I'd been hoping for a distraction and I wasn't disappointed. Had it been Jesus Christ himself, I don't think I would have been more surprised at what was standing on the other side of that door.

There are a lot of things one might expect to see during the Apocalypse: bat-winged demons soaring through blood-red skies; fiery-eyed warriors astride flaming skeleton-horses; flying skulls drenching the

land in an endless shower of bile. But not clowns. Then again, maybe that's exactly what you'd expect to see. I guess it would depend on how you feel about clowns.

The guy standing outside was the real deal. White greasepaint with the red slash of a grin? Check. Rainbow afro wig? Check. Round red nose that would almost certainly BEEP if squeezed? Check. He was even wearing a billowy yellow and blue checkerboard jumpsuit and those big floppy Ronald McDonald shoes.

We stood there for a moment, simply staring at each other. It was one of those situations where you're not sure what to do but you're convinced that anything you do will just make things worse.

"Well?" the clown finally asked.

I stepped aside so he could enter, muttering "Of course" when I saw the axe he carried.

Based on the expressions of the rest of the group, I think it's safe they were as surprised as me.

"What are you supposed to be?" Sam asked.

The center of attention, the clown took a seat on the altar. Like a magician performing a magic trick, the clown produced a cigarette and big, metal lighter from thin air, flicked open the lighter and lit the cigarette. Taking a deep drag off the cigarette, he slowly exhaled then looked at Sam. "I'm a clown, you moron."

Joey attached to her hip like a conjoined twin, Julia came a bit closer. "What's your name?"

"Clown," he said, and took another drag.

Sam grunted. "That's original."

I looked at Sam and started to shake my head when I had a realization. Sam really had no idea how obnoxious he was. He was simply expressing himself the only way he knew how. Chances were he'd had a father who was exactly the same way and who, during Sam's depressing childhood, had passed it on to him like a precious family heirloom. Sam wasn't evil; he just didn't know any better. I almost felt sorry for him then, almost but not quite.

"Where did you come from?" Emily asked. "I mean how far away. What's it like out there, in the other towns?"

"Same as it is here." Clown took another drag. "Just one big fancy pile of nothing." He noticed Joey staring at him in morbid fascination, tilted

his head back and blew a series of smoke rings, each smaller than the last, until five concentric circles hung momentarily in the air.

"Well, you can spend the night here if you want," Sam said, "but we don't have any food to spare. Sorry." That was Sam at his most generous.

Clown looked at him. Maybe it was only the glare of the candlelight, but his eyes seemed strange and shiny. "Thanks. That's a mighty generous offer but I don't plan on being here long."

"Then why are you here?" Emily asked.

"You'll know in a minute," Clown replied, still looking at Sam.

Julia wrapped her arm around Joey's shoulder. "Are you… waiting for something?"

Clown nodded. "Yep."

"For God's sake, what?" Sam demanded.

Emily screamed and Clown stood up. "That."

Emily was thrashing on the floor like a demon-possessed character in a horror movie, when movies were still a thing. Like a contortionist from hell, her body was bending at impossible angles while her limbs writhing like snakes as the bones melted away. A black foulness began to spray from her eyes and ears and nose and mouth, the liquid residue of the terrible transformation going on inside her. Emily had the H-Virus.

Emily began to expand and, in one of those moments of random association, I thought of that scene in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory when Violet Beauregarde chewed the forbidden gum and ended up a giant blueberry.

Emily's body had turned against her. Something terrible was growing inside her, a ravenous tumor dissolving organs and muscle and bone and replacing them with a living cancer. Her skin exploded in a shower of blood and mucous and worst things, revealing a giant, quivering mass the color of spoiled liver. From out of the bulk shot glistening tendrils of purple-veined flesh, stretching and flailing in all directions.

From under a pew, I watched Julia and Joey duck through the doorway leading to the pastor's study. Eyes wide and mouth wider, Sam was standing in the pulpit as if he was about to perform a sermon. Of Clown there was no sign.

Emily's still-human head had become a screaming fountain, spraying the room with black, vomit-scented bile. Sam was also screaming and, judging by the stain on his crotch, didn't smell too fresh either. He looked

like a cartoon character trying to run in two directions at once. I think his strong survival instinct was compelling him to run but his relationship with his sister, whatever sort of twisted connection it might, was just as strong. I would have felt genuinely sorry for him, under different circumstances. As it was, I was in “Eat him instead” mode.

Emily solved her brother’s dilemma for him. One of her tentacles snaked around his waist and squeezed, choking him off in mid-scream. Sam’s extremities bulged as tears of blood began to stream down his cheeks. He managed to get out one last bloody gurgle before his eyeballs exploded, reminding me of the time I pulled a tick, engorged on stolen blood to the size of a grape, off a puppy only for it to explode between my fingers. Same reached toward Emily and his lips moved, maybe trying to call to her name. Spine snapping with an audible CRACK, his top half toppled backward and his lower half slipped free. Still connected to his lower half by his partially unraveled intestines, Sam managed to reach toward his sister one last time. Then his hand dropped, and he lay still.

I was so engrossed in the spectacle of Sam literally falling to pieces that I didn’t notice one of Emily’s tentacles snaking its way toward me until it slithered around my left ankle constrictor-style and began to drag me across the stained carpet. Emily was reeling me in like a fish on a line.

Cursing, I kicked at the tentacle but it was as durable as a fire-hose. I yelled and screamed at Emily, begging her to let me go, knowing all the while that the Emily I knew was already gone. Her bubbling surface began to ooze and flow apart, forming a gaping maw. Emily wasn’t simply going to kill me after all. A living stomach, she was going to dissolve me in her juices. The maw became bigger and bigger as I drew closer and closer. In one last moment of clarity, I wondered what it would be like to be digested alive.

THUNK!

Clown’s axe sliced through the tentacle with enough force to embed itself in the floor. He pulled the axe free with no visible effort, kicked the squirming appendage aside and charged Emily. Two more tentacles whipped towards him. Clown ducked the first, somersaulted over the second, performed two back-flips that brought him practically face to face with Emily and buried the axe in her skull.

Emily quivered, sighed, and melted into a puddle of phlegm-colored goo. Clown picked up his axe and began to clean the blade with what must

have been the longest handkerchief in the world. Ankle on fire, I climbed to my feet and limped over to him.

"You… knew that was going to happen?" I asked.

Nodding, he continued to clean his axe.

"How?"

"She told me," Clown replied, raising his axe. "I don't know how it works. You'll have to ask her."

The absurdity of his statement didn't fully register at the time, something I attribute to mild shock. "So that's the whole reason you came here? You just somehow knew somebody had the H-Virus?"

Clown raised a painted eyebrow. "The what?"

"That's what we call it when somebody gets too close to one of those things and, you know, gets infected, or however you want to put it."

"Ah." Clown produced another cigarette and lit it while wearing a world-weary squint.

"So you just wander around, waiting for your… waiting for the axe's H-Virus sense to start tingling?"

Shrugging, he took a deep drag off the cigarette. "Got nothing better to do."

"Okay, so what's with the clown suit?" I asked.

Clown looked me in the face with his strange, shiny eyes. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Nothing," I said. "Never mind."

Julia came out, one hand over Joey's eyes. At the sight of the Emily-goo and Sam's remains, she closed her eyes and sighed. "Poor Sam. Poor Emily."

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Emily wasn't so bad, was she?"

"No. No she wasn't. She liked you, you know."

"Really?" That was a surprise. And she really had been all right, in her own way. Even Sam was okay in those rare moments when whatever drove him most of the time was taking a nap. Or maybe that's just me trying not to speak ill of the deceased, not that it mattered. They were just as dead either way.

Clown took one last drag off his cigarette and flicked it into the puddle of Emily-goo. "Been fun," he said, heading for the door.

"Where are you going?" Julia asked.

“Does it matter?” he replied without looking back. And he was right. Things are the same everywhere. They say death is the great equalizer. Alien invasions do a pretty good job too.

And so Clown left just as quickly as he’d come. When he left, he took the lethargy keeping us at the church with him. The next day, I scouted around and managed to find a car with keys in the ignition and some gas in the tank. Another couple of days to make preparations and we were on the road. The first stop will be my father-in-law’s farm. I try not to think about what I might find there because I always end up at the same place. If I find what I’m expecting, then we keep moving. That thought would have terrified once upon a time, but not anymore. For the first time since the Incident, I feel like somebody is watching out for us after all. And you know why? In the new reality, only one thought lets me sleep at night. Somewhere out there in the ruins of the old world, wanders an angry clown with an axe that tells him to kill things.

STAYING SMALL

Gene Stewart

Jingo the Clown had secrets.

Coby knew because he'd seen things. He paid attention to Jingo because he wanted to move up to clowning himself. As a dwarf, Coby knew he could make the rubes laugh. Half the time, they laughed just from seeing him. "How comical," they'd say to their spouses or kids; all he had to do was stand there. Dress him in clown motley and let him cut capers in white face and he'd slay them, he figured.

He never stopped to think Jingo might be jealous.

Coby's parents advised him to bide his time. "Do the clean ups, the load outs and keep your eyes sharp for something the Captain needs. Find that and you'll be set for life."

The Captain, who ran the circus, rarely seemed to need anything Coby could give. He wasn't booze, he wasn't cooze, as the circus rhyme went.

Worse, Coby noticed how, each year, their circuit brought them fewer bookings and fewer rubes. Ogling rubes, the Captain called them; if customers weren't coming to stare as much anymore, Coby thought, then how long could the circus drag on? Far from being set for life, Coby knew his lifestyle itself was dying.

Clowning, though, was forever. There had always been clowns and always would be. They'd begun as shamanic tricksters and Sufi mystics; they'd been court jesters and ship's mascots; and clowns were now on those glowing boxes people with houses called TV.

His favorite story, "Hop-Frog" by Edgar Allan Poe, had taught Coby some of the fear and respect even little people could conjure for themselves as clowns and soothsayers. He felt within himself the fire of clowning.

And so Coby stood one evening behind the tiger wagon, basking in their purrs, cupping a cornsilk cigarette and gazing at Jingo's wagon door. He was trying to get up nerve enough to approach the head clown when up walked Jingo himself, fresh from another loud meeting with the Captain. He'd probably asked for another raise, Coby figured. And then he saw who was with Jingo and he dropped the smoldering cigarette as his jaw went lax.

His own mother.

And they were cuddling and laughing. Were they drunk?

Coby took a step toward them, intending to demand answers, then, thinking better of it, backed up and crouched. The tigers stirred, one of them snarled above him. He tapped the bottom of their cage and they settled.

In the moonless gloom -- there were no street lights in a circus camp -- Coby could not see much, but it sure looked as if Jingo were putting some loving on his mother. She, he'd recognize anywhere; a dwarf like him, with flowing blonde hair to the ground, wearing one of her sparklies, the sequin-covered corsets demanded by the management when she cavorted with her husband, Coby's dad, on the backs of ponies during the equine exhibition.

When Jingo dragged Coby's mother into the wagon, Coby made his move, trotting across the grass between wagons and taking up a position under Jingo's wagon, beside one of the rear wheels. He heard them clomping above him, their voices a muffled buzz.

Once they'd ceased moving around, Coby came out from beneath the wagon and climbed, first, up the three back steps. He tried pressing his ear to the door, but heard only his own pulse.

Next he clambered down and looked around for something to stand on. Finding only an apple crate, in which four or five salt licks were kept, he dumped the blocks of salt and dragged the crate to the side of Jingo's wagon that had a window. He set the crate on end and climbed up onto it, balancing as it wobbled. He pressed his hands to the wagon's side, hoping they didn't hear the soft thump he made.

He put a foot sideways on one of the edges formed by the framework of the wagon. Rising up, he climbed, pulling himself in an awkward chin-up on the window sill.

Peering in, he was just in time to see Jingo standing over his mother, her pale face gazing up at him from the waterfall of golden ripples. Was she going to give one of those special kisses he'd heard about from hanging around the clown wagon?

Sure enough, Jingo pressed his mother to his waist and Coby was just about to turn away in disgust when a spark of light, brightly green at first but swelling to an intense white, flared just above his mother's head. As he clung to the outside of the wagon, gasping, he saw his mother...

...did she unfold?

She seemed to relax upward, becoming, in silhouette behind the glare of the light, as tall as Jingo himself.

The light blinked off and, to Coby's surprise, left no after images. None of those floating colors in his eyes obscured his vision. He was able clearly to see her standing now beside Jingo as they hugged, as they kissed mouth-to-mouth, as they chuckled.

His mother was no longer a little person.

She had ceased to be a dwarf.

Her hair hung to her shoulders now and covered them coyly. Her body, naked, was curvy and well-shaped, every bit as lovely as the bodies of the dancing girls the Captain was forever auditioning. And yet, there was a faint, special glow to her, too, something different; it was as if Coby's mother were now a rare and precious creature, like a unicorn, visiting among us for but a brief time.

It took away both his breath and his grip.

He fell hard, striking the crate on the way down. At once he rolled under the wagon, in case they glanced out.

As he lay in darkness, he thought about the light and the beings, above him. Was Jingo enchanting his mother somehow? Was she using some unknown clown's power to taste another world?

It was nearly dawn when his mother's cautious steps on the stairs awakened Coby from a shivering sleep. He watched her, from under Jingo's wagon, walk back to her own place. He watched her walk on little person's legs.

Coby knew now that he had to explore Jingo's wagon.

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The week following Coby's discovery proved busy. There was a finale to put on, then the systematic process of the tear down and load out. Coby ran here and there, doing odd jobs, helping both with animals and equipment. He learned to fold and stow tents, how to keep ropes from tangling and why the males and females of certain species were shipped apart.

One evening, as he and his parents sat in their wagon along with two other families, eating stew the younger women had prepared, Coby casually asked his mother if she'd ever thought about being a big person. "You
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know," he said, watching her face for reactions, "like the Captain or the dancing girls, or Jingo the Clown."

She winced, glanced away from him, and said, "Don't be silly, Coby. There's no reason. We're each of us fine as we are."

It was something she'd said all his life. He believed it, too. That's why it hurt so much to think it might be a lie.

Another time, on a chilly morning, working beside his father to lever up the big stakes that had been used to secure the elephants between shows, Coby asked, "Did you ever think you might be, well, someone else's child?"

His father stopped, leaned on his shovel and looked hard at Coby. He spat some chaw. "You been readin' them fairly tales?"

Having been warned that too much fantasy could lead to the Geek Tent, Coby shook his head. "Just thinking, is all. Do little folks like us ever have big children?"

"You know they do, look at Carl."

Coby blushed, having forgotten about Carl Dehner, whose parents were little people but who was, himself, big. He worked one of the carny booths on the mainline, enticing rubes to risk their hard-earned dimes on games of hardly a chance at all, as the carnies all said.

All told, Coby asked fifteen people that week questions that left them puzzled, curious, or just plain flummoxed. He learned little of much use. They fell back on old saws, mostly. His lessons, such as they'd been, were encapsulated in various sayings, and he heard them all again and again.

This time, though, each one took on a veneer of doubt, the way fresh paint often made old wagons look worse instead of better.

All through the week, Coby kept an eye on Jingo's wagon, hoping to get a chance to look around inside it.

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He got his chance the last night before pull out. It was raining and fog lingered like the scent of the big cats. Jingo the Clown had been called to a meeting of the head performers, no doubt to discuss which of two conflicting offers to accept, or a way to take on both and manage the trip efficiently.
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Coby, passing Jingo's wagon on his way to fetch some water so his mother could wash her hair, happened to see the clown leave. They even waved to each other; Jingo was often friendly to Coby, even though he was careful not to encourage the lad's aspirations toward clowning.

Lugging the bucket of water, Coby hobbled along a well-worn path in the fairgrounds grass. It was evening and rain spattered his face unpleasantly, as if the sky were spitting on him.

Fetching the water at the spigot nearest his wagon, Coby paused a moment to adjust his slouch hat. His rain gear, an old slicker cut down and re-stitched by his mother, kept slipping to one side, so big was it on him. He hefted the bucket, droplets of rain making intersecting ripples on its surface and began lugging again, pausing often to set down the bucket and rest his grip. He flexed his hands.

He happened to spot Jingo enter the Captain's wagon, along with three other bosses. Hurrying, he delivered the water to his mother, then made an excuse. "Harly wanted to see me," he said, as glibly as he dashed back outside.

Dashing through wet darkness, he reached Jingo's wagon in no time. The rear door was locked. However by this time, through simply keeping his eyes open, Coby knew about a cat's hatch, set to one side of the door. It wasn't used; Jingo had no use for pets who only ate a man's hard-earned pay. There was, on the inside, a small shelf kept against the hatch but, by butting the small flap with his head, Coby was able to push the shelf aside and worm his way in. Even a slightly larger little person would not have made it.

Once inside, he drew out a candle and some matches he'd saved from helping pack up the fortune teller's things. In the wobbly nimbus of light, he saw the crowded clutter of Jingo's possessions around him. Slipping free of his slicker, which he left by the flap, Coby crept toward the spot by the window where he'd seen his mother...

...change, he thought. Yes, she'd changed. Improved, even. In some ways. Ways that stirred feelings in him he didn't yet understand. Feelings that drew him on.

He looked for a clue, some object or substance that seemed out-of-place, but saw nothing. There were some books, mostly old, peeling things, like dead lizards with their tongues sewn shut. He passed the familiar rack of faces; egg shells, hollowed out and painted with each clown's make-up.

Coby hoped one day to add his own face paint design to the collection; no two could ever be alike in all of clowndom, he knew. He had gazed often at these and memorized them, so his own design, which he worked on when he got the chance, using crayons and smooth stones he found, would be the most original and striking ever.

He kept searching. There was a bowl of glass beads; they shimmered like swallowed coals in the candle's light. Above it, on a shelf, were a set of trays. On the top tray lay a small tobacco pouch.

Coby untied it, peered in and sniffed. It made him sneeze, itching deep inside his head. Definitely not tobacco, he thought. Tapping a sample onto the tray, he saw that it was green powder, with flecks that glittered in the flame's glow.

It looked like ground emerald.

That's when he remembered the pinch of green light he'd glimpsed. It had appeared atop or above his mother's golden head, just before she'd...

He shuddered. Was this the stuff? Some magical powder, perhaps brought from far away?

With shaking fingers he took a pinch of it and sprinkled some on his own head, holding his breath. In the hot, humid wagon interior, Coby swayed, eyes clamped shut. He felt nothing, saw no glimmer of light beyond his eyelids.

Sighing, he opened his eyes, then brushed the stuff off his head, out of his hair. Maybe magic words were needed, he thought. Maybe a want; he scanned the shelves, holding his candle high. He saw jars with dark, wriggling things in them. He saw crumpled paper bags no bigger than his hand, labeled in a spidery script he could not read. He saw chunks of stone; most looked shattered, as if by powerful hands. There were also splintered, charred bits of wood, as if they'd been struck by lightning.

He found a flat drawer in which lay fossils of delicate ferns and spiraled snails of some kind, in slate. They smelled faintly of coal or oil and some glistened as if wet.

Searching further, he discovered a bent trumpet, its bell dented and one of its valves missing, as if a tooth had been pulled. He was about to raise it to his lips when he saw that there was no mouthpiece; he'd almost forgotten to be quiet.

How had Jingo made his mother into that other, bigger woman? Why had she let him? How could she deny it, now?

He spotted a staff, propped in a corner by an empty sparrow cage, the square kind with bamboo bars. The staff itself proved much heavier than he'd expected. It was carved all over with intricate symbols. It ended in a crook big enough to go around his neck; Coby held it midway and the staff was at least three times his height. He ran his hands over it, enjoying the smoothness of the wood, the bumpy carvings, and the coolness, as if it were bone.

No animal, not even the leg of a giraffe, had a bone that long, though, so he knew it must be wood. Must be.

In the candlelight, though, it looked yellowed and so much like bone that he began to dislike touching it. He propped it back into the corner.

He decided he needed to do some more spying, perhaps even see how the trick was done by watching it from the beginning.

He resolved, then, to begin watching his mother closely.

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As they rode through the farmlands in the middle of the country, bored and weary, each family talked among itself. The wagons swayed and bumped, moving in a stately rhythm, pulled by horses, oxen, and old farm tractors. They crossed the land at a walking pace, leaving no trace of their passage, unless the scorn of disapproving villagers mattered.

The Captain and his dancing girls struck out from the wagon train each time a village drew near. They made forays, Coby's father said; his dad's voice always twisted with irony and his eyes always glanced merrily at his mother when this was said. Coby knew, from listening to clown talk, that the girls were good money-makers. They apparently helped out the many businessmen in those small towns, usually in the back rooms of VFWs or Elk Clubs, according to gossip.

"We'll never see a dime of that," one old clown, Jasper Japes, said, speaking around his cigar, which never left his lips. He did a hobo clown and Coby often wondered if he even needed makeup, so hangdog was Jasper's face.

Jingo perked up, slapping down an ace of spaces and taking the trick. As he gathered up the cards, he looked at Jasper. "You know as well as any, he smoothes the way for us with those girls. That's profit enough."
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"Not like in the old days," a third clown, Meinherr von Magnificent, who played a ratty-tatty burgomeister clown with huge lapels and a carnation that spat water on the kids in the front rows ringside, joined in. "In the old days, we was celebrated. Wherever we went, we was big news, and welcome."

"Nowadays, we're lucky not to be lynched," Jingo told him, dealing a new hand after a dealer's shuffle.

Coby faded into the blackness and jumped down from the poker wagon, as it was known during moves. He scampered back to his own family and found a meal waiting; stew again, and Mulligan to boot, the old burgoo, as his mother called it.

That time it was some rabbit, a few parsnips and carrots snatched on the run from a garden plot they'd passed a ways back. Mixed in oats with chives and wild onions, some dandelions left over from the salads Mrs. Claymore preferred and a few other odds and ends, and spiced to an eye-watering whahoo by the pickled hot peppers kept in jars slung under the wagon, it was a meal Coby both loved and hated. He hated it after he'd eaten it too many nights in a row, but he loved it when he got so hungry his stomach ached; between those extremes, it was, at least, something to chew on, as his father said. "Life's good when you got something to chew on, Coby. You remember that."

Coby didn't dare ask what there was left to chew in the overcooked mess.

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He watched his mother closely for signs of either bigness, or of wanting to be big. Sometimes, when she had to fetch a stool to reach something on a higher shelf, he thought, this is it, now she'll shine and get bigger. But she never did.

She also never gave Jingo the Clown much attention. If they passed in camp, they'd nod politely, same as any of the folks. If they weren't in each other's eyesight, they seemed, as far as Coby could tell, out of each other's thoughts completely.

Maybe, he thought, it wasn't something regular.

That would mean, he reasoned, it had been something special. Like a payment, he thought. Or an obligation.
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What kind of favor could his mother owe the head clown?

Was she softening Jingo up, so he'd accept him, Coby, as an apprentice? The thought made his heart speed, but it also made it sick, like a sick stomach. He wanted clowning, it burned in him, but he didn't want it that way.

He wondered at times if he should tell his father what he'd seen, but that never seemed like a very good idea.

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And then, late one night, after camp was pitched, the animals were watered and fed and tended, after the people had been fed and washed and tucked in for an exhausted snooze, his mother, acting furtive, sneaked from their wagon.

Coby almost missed it. He'd been dozing off, dreaming of a Brothers Grimm adventure he'd read that afternoon as the wagon swayed over the dirt roads of the rural midlands.

Yawning, he'd just rolled over and closed his eyes when he felt the touch of faint light on his face. His mother's hand caressed his back, a familiar gesture; she was checking on him. He breathed regularly, to convince her he was asleep and he very nearly was, all snug in his blankets and homemade quilt.

That's when he heard her sneaking. The soft creak of a floorboard, the shifty change of pattern to her breathing, and the way her sounds moved toward, not her bed, but the door, brought him out of slumber and, stealthily, out of bed. He knew the wagon well, so being in darkness didn't bother him. He followed her a few moments after she'd slipped out, the scent of the cooling air still fresh from her passage.

Outside, it was colder than he'd anticipated, but he dared not go back for a sweater. Instead, he squinted, standing on the top stair, trying to see her; a shadowed movement caught his attention. He followed the motion across camp, to Jingo's wagon.

He knew, then, that his patience might pay off. Quickly scanning for something to stand on, he found a wash tub propped to drain and dry by the Whistling Lady's wagon. She was asleep inside; he could tell by the various whistling snores escaping the various holes in her face and neck. How she'd gotten that way, no one ever said, but he'd heard the Captain say
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that the Whistling Lady was a one-of-a-kind miracle. And he'd said it among the folk, not to rubes, so Coby knew it amounted to something.

He took the tub, carrying it by leaning one shoulder inside it and lifting from within. He looked, he figured, like a cockeyed turtle. Waddling over to Jingo's wagon, he placed the tub face down, then hopped up onto it.

At once, the center bent under him with a hollow sound.

"What's that?" he heard Jingo ask, with a hiss of alarm.

His mother's soothing voice sounded then.

Coby, frozen, could only hope the window didn't give him away and, after a few moments of feeling caught, the panic wore off and he knew they hadn't bothered looking outside. He leaned up, grasped the sill and did a chin up.

He was just in time to see his mother drop her clothes and stand in front of Jingo, who looked taller than usual because he still wore his cowboy boots.

Coby watched, every detail etching into his mind.

Sure enough, Jingo reached up to the shelf with the green powder. He untied the sack, sprinkled some into his palm and blew on it, softly, as he said a few hushed words. Already a faint glow came from his cupped palm.

Coby held his breath. His fingers strained and he stood on tiptoe, balancing on the edge of the tub now to gain that quarter inch its rim offered.

Jingo then rubbed his hands together over Coby's mother's head, then slapped them, gently. He touched her all over. The green light flared and became intense white.

Again, Coby noticed that it did not blind him. Instead, it seemed to shoot through him, as if he were dreaming it perhaps.

As before, his mother began growing. As before, she became somehow special, younger-looking and not quite human. Her hair shined brighter, her skin glowed like a luminescent pool of milk.

Jingo caressed her and kissed the side of her throat.

She pushed him back and said, "You promised. This time I--"

"You are not in a position to bargain," he told her.

Coby held tight, muscles quivering, ears straining, eyes squinted the better to pierce the gauze curtain's veil.

His mother took a step back. "The way I see it, you're the one who needs the deal." He chuckled, as un-clown-like a sound as Coby had ever heard, full of malice and bitterness. This was worse even than when Jasper got drunk and cursed the gods.

Jingo sat in a spavined old chair, which brought his knees up as high as his face. He placed his hands on those knobby knees and leaned back. "Madame, you astound me. If it weren't for me, your son would not be here, you and your husband both would be dead and everything you have would be--"

"And what do I have? Servitude doing horse tricks for bored farmers? A wagon that absorbs the weather and keeps me seasick? A life of being scoffed at, laughed at and ridiculed by people who consider themselves normal and I'm the freak?"

"Oh, Madame, you purchased this life. I warned you."

"You did, with sweet lies. You warned me only of the road and after what we've done, those hardships sounded as nothing."

"Indeed." Jingo scratched behind his left ear and brought out an egg. "See this? Your son's face, or it will be. Or would have been." He briefly displayed the painted egg shell, then slapped his hands together, much the same way as when he'd made the green powder flare into light. The egg shell, however, simply shattered and fell to the ground, leaves from a dead tree.

"You can't do that."

"I have done it, Madame, and I will do worse besides, if you don't obey me in this, as in all things."

Coby could not hold on any longer. His muscles cramped, shaking his whole frame enough to make the wagon start to tremble. His grip slipped and down he went, the wash tub overturning to land upright beside him with a big tin boom.

It was like striking a bass drum.

Rolling, as he'd done before, Coby hid under the wagon, then crawled toward the stairs. He wanted to know where his mother might run to, in her current big condition.

Instead, though, he heard the window tugged open, then, a moment later, Jingo's voice saying, "Must've been the wind flipping that old tub."

This emboldened Coby, who was angry, upset and confused about what he'd been learning.

And then he heard Jingo say, "You serve me, as agreed." This was followed by a slap, then another.

Coby heard his mother whimper.

He'd been around circus folks enough to have seen brutality. He knew men beat their wives, wives beat their husbands and anyone could kick kids around. He'd seen people bruised at work, smiling through the pain, denying anything was wrong. He'd even been friends with people who thought they deserved what they got, so hammered down by daily humiliation had they become.

He wasn't about to let his mother become one of those.

Jumping down from the tub, he ran around to the door and pounded on it. From inside the wagon, he heard a bellow, pitched low like the lioness when she had tried to give birth to the breached cub. His skin rippled. Gooseflesh broke out. The sound was uncanny, full of rage and pain.

Pounding on the door was not working and the sounds inside had grown louder now. The wagon was rocking, shaking. He pictured his mother being punched and kicked and this renewed his panic to help, his urgency to make things right.

Too small to break down the door, he considered raising the alarm. Others would come, if he called out. They could demand the door be opened, or force it if need be. They could save his mother --

--but by then, she would have taken too much punishment. The sounds from inside and the lurching of the wagon proved that.

Coby remembered the pet door and dropped to his knees. He pushed the flap; it did not give. Lowering his head, he rammed at it and it gave a few inches. By thrusting himself at it, he was able to slide back the bookshelf once again blocking it and worm his way into the dark corner of the wagon.

The instant he stuck his head inside, sounds of flesh on flesh, of muffled cries, of agonic moans assailed him. He wriggled to free himself of the pet door, then stood, knocking over the bookshelf.

The crash and thud of falling shelf and books did nothing to abate the struggle going on further inside the wagon. He wished he could see better; the only source of light was the window and a few wobbly candles set

inside hurricane lamps. It was a twilight world. One in which a titanic struggle was going on.

At least she's big now, Coby thought. Had his mother still been little, her fighting chances would be diminished.

Dashing forward, Coby made out the two shapes, only something was wrong with them now. Instead of Jingo looming over his mother, even in her big state, it looked more as if Jingo were on his knees, bowing to her. And she was hunched over him in a strange parody of something sexual, something sensuous.

Had he misunderstood?

Were they... playing?

Coby swallowed bile and clenched his fists. As he stepped closer he caught a whiff of blood and faeces. It gagged him. It smelled the way the camel had, that time it tore open its belly trying to jump a barbed-wire fence.

He remembered the Captain fetching his ancient rattling revolver and placing a single shot into the back of the camel's head. "Good-bye, Mabel," the Captain had muttered and no one had so much as smiled, knowing that the loss of a good animal was a serious blow to a circus as threadbare as theirs.

Breathing through his mouth so he didn't choke again, Coby squinted into the half light, then shuddered. A set of teeth chomped, he could see that much. They worked hard, eagerly devouring what looked like the top half of Jingo's body.

The head clown had no head anymore.

No shoulders, either, Coby realized.

Even as his vision adjusted a little more he spotted something clutched and red, gleaming wetly. It pulsed, quivering as if trying to get away, before the teeth found it and squished juices from it that spattered the ceiling.

His heart, Coby thought, his stomach heaving.

Trying desperately to understand what he was seeing, he raised his gaze, seeking his mother's transformed, radiant face, the beautiful visage he remembered from the first time he'd spied on them. It was not there, though.

In its place was, well, he could only consider it some kind of malformed creature.

Her head lolled, bobbing featureless and her shoulders sloped steeply, ending in arms far too slender. They looked more like tentacles, but with no suckers, only a single vicious-looking claw at the tip of each.

Where her belly would have been, a gaping maw full of teeth, each the size of a man's finger, chomped and chewed, enjoying the offered meal Jingo represented.

The legs, massive like an elephant's but covered in oozing warts and puckered pustules, were scabbed and bleeding. They looked as uncomfortable as sliced gums and shredded tongue.

Coby whimpered now. He took a step back and the featureless head waggled toward him. It bobbed and hovered like a cornstalk overladen with ears. It came close enough to touch him; he saw mucus dripping from it.

"No," he whispered.

"Yes," it hissed. "Go!"

And he ran, tripping and falling several times before reaching, and unlocking, the door. He burst from the wagon at full speed and did not stop running until he was huddled in his safe place under the big cats, shivering in the cool air now and unable to stop seeing those horrible things.

He grew afraid of closing his eyes.

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Jingo was not seen again after that night. The other clowns figured he'd had enough and understood the impulse. The Captain thought it odd that Jingo had run off without his final pay, but figured he'd more than made up for it in poker winnings.

The head clown's wagon was eventually converted into Coby's wagon, complete with a new paint job. They threw away a great many of the things Jingo had collected, either not understanding them or not daring to use them for fear of drawing too much attention from the darker beings who still bound in them. Besides, they had no need of such clutter.

Coby's mother never mentioned having seen him on the night Jingo disappeared. He never asked her what he'd seen. Both knew the answers would be worse than the doubts.

They also chose to keep their inner, true forms disguised. To stay small, as Coby put it. This meant forsaking the kingdom their kind had lost and embracing the new lives they'd made for themselves. What mattered
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wasn’t what could be seen in this or any world, but, like a circus wagon, what was kept inside.

EGGFACE

Dave Carne

“Hallo Mr. Pepe, how are you today? What’s that? Oh dear me, you’re sad. I can see you are wearing a very big frown.”

The transformation was complete; a large balding head, with two bright orange tufts of spiky hair, sprouted horizontal, either side a china white face. He had deep sunken eyes framed by violet rings and, above each, he had painted a thick black eyebrow. A tired drooping mouth was carved in crimson greasepaint, so wide it nearly touched his ears. He had pushed on a bright red nose right in the middle of his face.

Mr. Pepe sat in the driver’s seat, alternating his gaze between his image in the vanity mirror and a painted goose egg he gently caressed in his lap. The egg was a perfect replica of his persona in miniature; an exact copy of every carefully painted feature he now wore. As he examined the little face, he rolled his head from side to side and murmured a throaty chuckle to himself. He spent several minutes in unspoken conversation, occasionally touching up his make-up; then he gently placed the egg into a small wooden box filled with cotton wool. Finally, Mr. Pepe gave a puff of his cheeks, flipped the box shut and wound up the window of his little yellow car.

“Gosh Mr. Pepe, it’s dark here and there’s no one around.”

A chill had descended hours earlier with the fading autumn daylight; he had parked at the end of a remote country lane in front of a battered five bar gate. He removed the key from the ignition and the headlights went out, leaving him in darkness as he got out of the car. Mr. Pepe fumbled in the pocket of his long brown duster and produced a small torch, it clicked into light and instantly a little beam began to wave about against the night, picking out a rutted mud driveway between an avenue of dark looming trees. In the distance, through the branches, he spotted a dim yellow light. He flashed his torch around and soon discovered a small wooden gate, half-hidden away amongst the foliage. Hanging to one side was a metal sign.

“Yew Tree Cottage, Oh doesn’t that sound so sweet, Mr. Pepe, I bet it’s so pretty in the summer.”

Mr. Pepe opened the gate leading to Yew Tree Cottage and started to walk toward the light. He wore a red hooped jumper and yellow trousers that came right up to his chest, they reached to just above his elongated blue

boots. His long duster coat swished back to his sides as he put his hands on his hips and strode up the path. Each step was deliberate; he arched his shoulders back and looped a big blue boot forward waist high as if he was stepping over an imaginary obstacle.

"Hey-Ho Mr. Pepe, are you off to do a job?" Mr .Pepe nodded. *"Have you got your tools?"* Mr. Pepe stopped short and held the palm of his hand up against his wide open mouth; then pointed a finger in the air holding a dramatic pose, before patting down the front of his coat. His eyes opened wide as he felt something in his breast pocket. He slowly nodded his head and his wide post-box mouth twisted into a cruel grin.

"Well done Mr. Pepe, you can't do a job without your tools can you?"

Mr. Pepe shook his head, and continued right up to the door of the cottage. The building was set back several hundred feet from the lane and there were no other buildings to be seen. The walls were formed from irregular shaped stone and the slate roof overhung like an umbrella. The light he had seen from the lane was coming from a low window, inside the curtain was partially drawn and the warm glow from within spilled out onto a neatly cropped lawn underneath. Mr. Pepe crept toward the glass and looked in. He could just see a narrow angle of the room.

"It's cosy inside Mr. Pepe, cosy and warm. Don't you wish you had a nice cosy warm house like this?" Mr .Pepe nodded.

"But you haven't got a nice house, have you, Mr. Pepe? Just a dirty old room in that awful block of flats with those nasty kids banging your door late at night." He slowly nodded again.

"Why haven't you got a nice house like this then, Mr Pepe? Is it because someone stole everything you worked so hard for?" Mr Pepe clenched his fists together at his sides.

"Oh dear, Mr. Pepe, it's not very nice to steal something from someone, especially if they're suppose to be your best friend."

He stood motionless to one side of the window, studying the room. Suddenly a figure passed by; Mr. Pepe did not flinch but kept statue still, his looming silhouette unnoticed by the occupant. Shortly after, the figure moved back into view and settled down into an armchair, facing away from the window and completely unaware of the watching eyes.

Mr. Pepe observed the seated figure, wrinkles and gray thinning hair had transformed the once handsome bold appearance, one that long ago beguiled the young ladies; but to Mr .Pepe he was instantly recognisable.

He could just hear the cheery tones of a radio, playing old time music hall songs. It was one of his favourite programs so he stood there at the window and listened.

"Those were the days, Mr. Pepe, we had so much fun. All the crowds used to gather at the stalls, eager to watch the show. And the children, my how they loved you. Mr. Pepe, they would shout and you would do a trick and they would laugh. Everyone laughed then." As Mr. Pepe reflected on happier days, a tear tracked down his face, leaving a glistening streak in his chalked make-up.

"He stole it; it was always yours, never his. He was nothing, just boring Charlie Rasmus, no one really liked him, no one thought he was funny, he copied Mr. Pepe and stole him from you. No one believed you, but I always knew the truth, Mr. Pepe."

The light went out, he'd been daydreaming, he moved away and leant back against the cold stone of the cottage, soon he heard the slow drum of footsteps on the stairs. He waited for a while, time enough for someone to undress and fall asleep.

"Time to go to work, Mr. Pepe. He said it was his; so let him have it, forever."

The front door was locked, so he quietly moved around the cottage looking for another way in. At the back of the building a glass porch leant over a back door it was full of small glass panels and one smashed easily. Mr Pepe put his fingers in his ears, his knees knocked together like slow clapping hands.

"Ha! Mr. Pepe, careful, you'll wake the dead." Everything remained quiet and no one stirred within. The key was left in the lock and soon Mr. Pepe was inside an old kitchen, it was dark but he could make out copper pots and pans hanging from the ceiling and an old wood burning oven, there was still the homely smell of bread hanging in the air.

The door to the main living room was open so Mr. Pepe walked inside; he spotted the empty armchair he had been viewing earlier. Mr. Pepe sat down in the comfy chair, and stretched out his legs.

"Oh that's so nice, isn't it, Mr. Pepe, very high quality, no springs sticking in your back or nasty smells from the second hand shop."

Mr Pepe sunk into the chair and closed his eyes.

"This should have been yours, Mr. Pepe."

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Charlie stirred, he'd fallen asleep again, the radio had moved on to the shipping forecast and the fire had burnt down. *Must have been out for hours,* he thought. He felt a cold ripple slide down his back and had the uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching him. He stood up and turned around to face the window. Was there a movement? *Silly old fool*, he thought to himself. *Up the wooden hill then, old boy.* He turned off the light, locked the door and slowly climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

Just as sleep was about to consume him, Charlie gazed at the framed pictures on his bedside table. *Goodnight Jess,* he said to a wedding portrait. *God bless her soul.* Then his attention was drawn to a large framed photo behind. Two circus clowns were pictured standing over a painted wooden sign, arms on each other's shoulders, both wonderfully happy with brightly coloured faces, tufts of red hair and big grinning smiles. The sign read: *Charlie Rasmus and Mr. Pepe.*

Poor old fool he thought to himself, *he never got over it. I wonder where he is now?*

Charlie woke in panic, his chest felt tight and he couldn't move his arms. *My God, I've had a stroke,* was his first thought. Then a blurred face came into focus as his lamp was turned on. I must be dreaming, he thought, as a familiar face from his past stared down at him. He tried to cry out but his mouth was sealed. He tried to move but he was bound to the bed, he could see the cargo straps tied across the covers.

"There, Mr. Pepe, see him squirm. Well, he wanted your face so much, why don't you let him have it?"

Mr. Pepe laid out a leather pouch onto the prone chest of Charlie Rasmus and selected a shiny silver scalpel.

"Oh you big baby, Charlie, don't cry, here, let Mr .Pepe make you smile."

Mr. Pepe leant his left hand down on Charlie's forehead and held him down into his pillow; then he pushed the blade deep into Charlie's right cheek and slowly pulled it through the flesh and duct tape to the corner of his mouth. A hair line crack of blood appeared then, after a second's pause, it gaped and blood began to seep out over his twitching jaw and neck. Charlie gurgled cries of pain and started kicking his legs, but he was held quite tight. Mr. Pepe carefully repeated the incision on the other side. Blood
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now flowed steadily from the gash, staining the sheets cherry red. Mr. Pepe lifted the fleshy flaps up.

"Oh Mr .Pepe, Charlie left his dentures in, let's help him out with them."

Mr. Pepe leant back, pulled a red handled long-nosed set of pliers out of his tool pouch and carefully gripped the tobacco stained denture. Then with a swift yank he plucked the ceramic plate from Charlie's mouth. He noticed it wasn't a full denture as Charlie's two eye teeth had bent outward with the force.

"Oh dear, Mr. Pepe, best tidy those up too."

Mr. Pepe used the pliers to remove the two remaining teeth, although one snapped in the socket whilst the other came out with a fragment of bone the size of a button and dropped onto Charlie's chest.

"Butter fingers, Mr. Pepe; now the eyes and nose."

Charlie had stopped kicking and moaning and was now quite still, leaving Mr. Pepe to continue without hindrance. As he deftly went to work, carving features into the face, he compared his handiwork against the painted goose egg that he had placed on the bedside table. He used a needle and thread to stitch the eye lids open and super glued a latex skull cap with two red hairpieces onto Charlie's head. Then he applied make-up to complete the visage, careful to mimic the features of the watching egg. As a finishing touch, he pushed a red ball into a neatly carved hole where Charlie's nose had been.

When the makeover was complete he climbed from the bed and disappeared into the bathroom to wash. It was some time later when he returned. Charlie remained silent, but his chest still rose and fell steadily. He felt empty inside, empty and lost. Quickly he went through a tall double wardrobe and found some clothes that fitted. As he was dressing he could not help but contemplate the grisly scene, his eyes moving between the painted egg and the bloodied mess now lying in the bed.

"Goodbye, old friend," he said, then left the room, went down the stairs and walked out of the cottage just as it was getting light.

Charlie fluttered in and out of consciousness his jaw, face and mouth throbbing with an agonising pain and he could taste the blood in his mouth. He was sure someone was looking down on him.

"*Hello Charlie, how are you today? What's that? Oh dear me, you're sad. I can see you are wearing a very big frown."*

THE CHAOS THEORY AND THE CLOWN

Neil Leckman

Jason Albright had wanted to be a clown for as long as he could remember. In grade school he was the class clown, which ultimately meant he was hated by most teachers as a disruption to the learning process. Girls loved to laugh at his antics but would never go out with him on a date because he was a bit of a fool and they didn't want to be made fun of. Jason was oblivious to all of this, though, as his one thought was to leave everyone he met with a smile on their faces. At first his jokes fell flat since he didn't know the first thing about humor and timing, people laughed at him instead of with him. Over the years he learned to fine tune the humor so that he got the timing and punch lines down to a fine art. The future looked bright.

Jason's other passion was physics, which would seem to be at odds with a sense of humor on all levels. Jason believed there was a basic theory that could tie the two together but teachers tried to discourage him from trying to link two things that were so dissimilar. Late at night when he sat in silence and the loneliness ate at him like cancer, he would totter on the brink of comprehension and panic. At those moments he would get up and turn the stereo or television up real loud to push the panic back before it engulfed him. After the moments passed he would laugh at his own failings and fall asleep, exhausted by the effort it took to once again escape the madness that hungered for him as much as he hungered for laughter.

Nobody realized what lay behind the constant smile and jokes. The only one who came close to the truth was his physics teacher, the one who committed suicide in his garage by sucking on exhaust fumes. His eyes were wide open with a look of terror, yet he had a smile on his face. The detectives that took the case came to the conclusion there was no foul play involved since the teacher left a letter explaining how he lusted after several students, both boys and girls. He knew that his passions would eventually disgrace his family and hurt his wife of twenty years, so he took the 'noble' way out, with a smile. The ligature marks on his neck looked to be from a failed attempt to hang himself earlier that same day. The frayed rope lay beside the driver's side door on the oil stained garage floor.

Jason went home bruised and sore and laughed himself to sleep the day it happened. He stayed home sick for four days and hoped the hand

shaped bruises on his arms would fade before he went back to school. The teacher had fought back fiercely in the final moments as the subtle poison, not exhaust fumes, took the last of his life. It wasn't the first life Jason took; in fact it wasn't even one of the first one hundred lives he took. Each one of those deaths ate at his humanity a little. Now that humanity had been stretched so thin, all he had was lifeless eyes and a big smile. So when he graduated, he decided to enrol in clown school, thinking he could find himself there. Instead what he found was a school about chaos and the people who dealt it out a little at a time.

His first lesson was the tiny car that clowns pile out of. If ten clowns piled out that meant that twelve went in, two paid the price so ten could come back out. Chaos would let you bend the laws of physics, but only at a price. The first time they piled into the car he heard blood curdling screams as the first two clowns went in and a fountain of blood erupted, covering the other clowns in red. It all faded except for their noses and lips. Chaos had a price for happiness and it was souls, lots of souls. Tonight was a special performance that would feed chaos for a long, long time, at least Jason hoped so. At random spots under the portable bleachers he had planted cylinders of poisonous gas that were odorless and almost instantly fatal. Each one was set with a timer that would open up the valve twenty minutes into the big show. That would be right after Christine came out and did the stunts on the back of her horse, Wilbur. Just long enough for the "Flying Wilanskis" to come out and climb up to the high wire. Once there the clowns would roll out in their little car and pile out to entertain the crowd while the Wilanskis prepared for their act. Juliette Wilanski had laughed at him when he told her that he was in love with her. Well now he was going to have the last laugh.

He had taken one of those cans of oxygen you could buy for trips into the mountains and jury rigged a small facemask. It would only last long enough for him to watch his handiwork, but that was all he wanted. As the Wilanskis were climbing up the rope ladders to their perches, people in the audience began to slump in their seats, dead. Soon panic ensued, but that only hastened the deaths as people breathed quicker. Jason sat in his tiny car, mask strapped to his face as people all around him fell down, gasped and died. He could feel the chaos reaching out and plucking their souls away. He waited until Jake Wilanski fell from the high wire and snapped his neck at an impossible angle. Jason climbed out of his car and looked up at

the remaining members of the Flying Wilanskis and waited. In panic they crawled around looking for an exit, but there was only thick tent fabric everywhere they looked. Tim fell next, his leg snapping when he hit a platform part way down, the bone sticking out as he hit the ground, unmoving. Tony reached out for Juliette, his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell forward, bouncing off the tight rope, spinning as he plummeted to the ground. Juliette held her breath, but it was silly to think that would stop the inevitable from happening. She slumped across the tight rope and slid off, arms limp at her sides. She hit the edge of the net placed below her in case she fell; it bounced her over next to the dead horse.

Jason ran over and laid down next to her, removing the tiny mask he wore and throwing it into the crowd.

When the detectives got there, one of them looked down at Jason and said, “Leave to a freaking clown to think this was funny!!”

Chaos was happy too. For one day random deaths didn’t happen, but only for one day.

GOODTIME CHARLIE

Kevin L. Jones

The play area outside the hamburger stand was deserted, the slides empty, the swings rocking gently back and forth in the chilly night breeze. Bobby zipped up his jacket with one hand and rummaged through his pocket looking for his lighter with the other. He sat down on a nearby bench next to the play area's full time inhabitant and lit up a smoke. He took a long drag and looked over at the life-sized effigy of Goodtime Charlie, permanently fixed to the bench. He blew a cloud of smoke in its face and muttered, "Fucking clown."

Young folks and children of all ages across the globe loved the harlequin mascot of the fast food restaurant where he was employed but he had always hated him. He thought Charlie was creepy as hell. Although the plastic figure next to him smiled blankly at Bobby, to him it looked somehow sad. It kind of reminded him of the tormented character that Lon Chaney Sr., had played in Laugh Clown Laugh. Bobby looked towards the restaurant's entrance as he saw the night shift departing. He glanced down at his wristwatch and shook his head in disgust. Somehow, while he had been spacing out, twenty minutes had elapsed and he was late for work. He rose from the bench and glanced back at Goodtime Charlie. The plastic statue appeared somehow different. He took a moment and studied it. Charlie's left hand had always rested on his knee but it now sat palm down on the bench off to his side. Bobby closed his eyes, turned and rushed towards the restaurant entrance. He tried to tell himself that the hand had always been on the bench; that he was just imaging things, but deep down he knew he was lying to himself.

As he entered the restaurant, his other coworker on the graveyard shift glared at him. She chided him in her thick Argentine accent, "Late again, Bobby. I thought I would have to work tonight by myself."

Bobby grunted in way of reply as he poured himself a coke. He then put on his headset and took his place at the drive thru window. He sucked his soft drink up through a purple straw and glanced over at Claudia. She had her back turned to him as she intently chopped onions and lettuce. Even in her goofy looking fast food restaurant uniform she was insanely hot. Bobby shut his eyes as he recalled the one and only time they had slept

together. He wished he could go back in time and relive that moment once again. After their night together he had asked her out several times but she had not been interested. Now every time they were together she went out of her way to be cold and distant. Spending the night within the confines of the restaurant with her was going to be depressing.

Bobby sighed and decided not to dwell on the past. He would just have to make the best of a bad situation. Luckily the night seemed to fly by. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Time for his break. He grabbed a couple of cheeseburgers from under the bake-a-light and went outside to eat with Goodtime Charlie. He sat on the bench and took his first bite of his food. He looked at the plastic clown from the corner of his eye. Charlie's head had turned and was looking directly at him. Bobby refused to believe what was happening and continued eating. He methodically consumed his burger even though the night air seemed to grow blacker. The floodlights that usually lit the restaurant's exterior seemed to dim. Bobby felt as if he was being swallowed by the night. The world around him was now completely dark. All that seemed to exist was himself and Goodtime Charlie.

Bobby turned his head towards the clown. Its inhuman smile widened as its lips parted. Bobby whimpered softly as he saw Charlie's crooked brown teeth. Black blood dribbled from the corner of the clown's mouth and ran down its dead white chin. The horrid plastic thing croaked, "I'm hungry."

Bobby held out his half eaten burger. "Want a bite?"

The clown sneered at the offering. "Give me fresh meat." It pointed at the restaurant. "Feed me that tasty bitch."

Bobby began to laugh hysterically as tears streamed down his cheeks. He didn't know why but the clown's request seemed perfectly reasonable to him. In fact it seemed like the best idea that he had ever heard. He got up from the bench, eager to do Goodtime Charlie's bidding.

At sunrise, a police car pulled up to the drive thru. The cop honked his horn when no one took his order. He exited his cruiser and walked over to the drive thru window. He looked in and could see blood on one of the food preparation counters. The crimson liquid was dripping down onto the tiled floor and gathering in a small pool. He drew his pistol as he heard noise coming from the side of the building. He cautiously crept towards the sound. When he arrived at the small playground he saw something he would

never forget, a young man in a fast food uniform sitting on a bench trying to force the dismembered corpse of a teenage girl into the plastic unmoving mouth of Goodtime Charlie.

The officer cuffed the madman who mumbled over and over again, “Charlie was hungry.”

And during the next thirty years that Bobby spent confined in a padded cell that’s all he would ever say.

WHO I AM

Patricia Anabel

Who I really am you ask
Why do I wear the freaky mask
That mask is there to hide real me
Without it I would not be

I am your bad luck charm
Inflicting pain and harm
Nightmares are my special skills
Your frightened shrieking gives me thrills

I am a ghastly ghost
Macabre parties host
I bear the news of nearing death
The venom diffused with my breath

I am the blackest darkness
A sinister beast with no harness
My reflection no mirror can bear
Many shiver enduring my glare

I am the evil creeper
Behind your closet door
If you are a heavy sleeper
Tomorrow will come no more

I am a tyrant ruler of this eerie town
Wearing very proudly my insanity crown
They have tried to kill me, burn, and even drown
But I am still laughing - crazy, freaky clown.

THE SECRET MESSAGE

Matthew Wilson

Her Majesty's Prison, Hallon
39 Chester Square
London A19B 42X

THINKING OF YOU.

Dear Bryan,

I hope you remember our tricks as children. Hopefully you recall when we'd pass secrets letters in class with invisible ink. If you haven't thought me mental in sending you a piece of paper with three words - I had to give the guards something - hopefully you've sprinkled these real letters with hot water to make them briefly visible.

How are you? And how is prison? Things are still samey here. Mother hates you for the humiliation you bought upon our family and Dad has died of shame but things are pretty much the same.

Mom said you were throwing your life away being a clown; we all have a sense of humour, brother, but a man has to make a living from a decent profession. No matter, you were always the best for me. You won Helen. You knew I loved her but you won her.

The biggest joke of all, huh?

No. I swore before I started this letter I would not get mad.

I know you told us you didn't kill her and I believe you. You're my brother and I love you. But I can never forgive you taking her away from me

So I took her away from you.

Mom innocently gave me the idea. Said one clown looked like another. I put that silly make up on, the squeaky nose covered most of my face as I walked the back corridors of the circus; making sure I waved to everyone.

Mom would have had to put her glasses on to recognise me. I was always the sensible one. Calm and rational who hadn't played April's Fool in years. The only one who could make such a plan. You were always too emotional.

As agreed, Helen was waiting for you in your changing room.

I gave her one final chance. She rejected me.

Oh, brother. Look at the blight you bought on our family. Look what you made me do! But you made up for it by taking the fall. I guess we're even. You may hate me from where you are but you won't be coming home for a long time. Maybe never.

You moaned there was no evidence at your trial. You hold the real thing in your hand now, brother. Proof you were set up.

Don't believe your eyes are playing tricks.

I put enough ink on this page to be legible for a minute, maybe more. Just long enough to say goodbye. This ink is of my own invention, better then what we had in school. After you betrayed me I had to learn a lot of things quite quickly.

Are the words fading? Better call a guard quick, funny boy.

Once the page cools, the truth slips away like snow prints in the sun.

Like your freedom.

I killed Helen. Me. Me. Me.

Where's your sense of humour now?

Goodbye brother. In my heart I love you. But even now that fades.

Fading... fading.

THE CLOWN SLAYER

Olivia Arieti

Derek was an acrobat but he never liked working in the circus. That spectacular and unique form of entertainment appeared to him halfway between the grotesque and the carnivalesque; the colourful spectacle paraded by the heterogeneous assortment of performers was nothing but a sad display of frustrated exhibitionists whose last chance was the circus ring. He also pitied the deformed that used their physical irregularity as a squalid appeal for even a more squalid laughter and the animals, obliged to live out of their natural habitat and endure endless hours of harsh training.

The ring, too, always looked sad and lonely whether it was livened up by the clashing sounds and blazing colours or darkened by the silent shadows that crept in after the show.

In particular, Derek hated clowns. Their painted faces, red noses and enormous mouths more likely to devour than smile, scared him. He considered them as soulless masques that laughed and cried on command, always jumping up and down in baggy old clothes with shoes so big as if ready to walk on you and crush you. Surely those creatures possessed both devilish and ghoulish qualities hidden under their oversize costumes and garish wigs; when he was a child, in particular at night time, he always shrank away in horror should he bump into one after the show.

More than once the acrobat was determined to leave the circus but it wasn't easy; his roots were there, right under the loathed tent, on the ring, right in the trailer where his family lived. Derek was born in the circus; his grandparents were acrobats, his mother was one of the loveliest and bravest aerialists ever seen, his father a renowned tightrope walker.

The horrid event that befell the acrobat on the day of his first public appearance increased his hate and intolerance. The body of his mother was found among a heap of costumes in the little tent where the clowns dressed up for the show. Strangely, she was wearing a clown costume as if obliged to change before the macabre deed. Red stripes of blood supplied a horrifying contrast to the bright patterns; her disfigured painted face was fixed in a horrifying smile. The fingers were chopped off as a sign of hideous punishment.

Sadly, Derek himself found the body. Horror and disgust cut his heart. As cold and white as death, he swore revenge; his hate and fury turned into insanity.

Although the tragedy stirred the whole circus community, the show went on just the same. The entire spectacle appeared as a nightmare to the boy's swollen eyes; the performers' efforts to smile and amuse looked more grotesque than usual; somehow the animals only seemed to sympathise with his sorrow. They didn't respond to their masters' orders and roared wild and loud, creating general uneasiness and terror.

Most dramatic of all were his father's uncertain steps on the rope; for a moment that seemed infinite all eyes looked up at the distant silhouette struggling with the effort to keep his balance or plummet to certain death.

Anxiety and dread added to grief blocked Derek's agility; a frightening stillness froze his limbs and the acrobat had to leave the ring before the end of his miserable performance.

After the show the circus family went back to the terrifying episode. Tears replaced smiles and laughter, sighs and moans the cries of merriment and fun. All huddled around the boy and his father so deeply grieved and wounded.

That was how it went among circus people, a continuous clash of contrasting feelings and passions, always coexisting with a dismaying mastery of emotions and common sense.

Nobody could explain such a horrid crime, not even the police who, after an interminable but unsuccessful investigation, closed the case.

A year later, the tightrope walker died. All agreed that his death was due to the fellow's inconsolable grief.

The young acrobat now had good reasons to keep stuck to the circus ground. As his hatred and insanity increased, his revenge plans became wickeder. The clowns had to be punished. One or more had murdered his mother.

In his folly he conceived the idea that his childhood fears and horror were a prelude to that final act.

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Late one evening, shortly after the aerialist's death, Derek happened to hear George, an old clown, crying desperately. Curious, he peeped through the
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little tent where the fellow had just changed and saw him sobbing.

"I shouldn't have, I shouldn't," then after a long sigh, he whispered, "forgive me, my dearest."

His face reflected in the mirror with the white paint melting like wax and lipstick dripping like blood was a horrifying image that impressed Derek as much as the words the clown had just spoken.

What could the fellow have done that made him so desperate? A horrible crime, perhaps?

Suddenly he recalled seeing his mother enter George's trailer once; he had always wondered why but never dared to ask.

His suspicions were confirmed when the clown didn't attend the tightrope walker's funeral.

The criminal couldn't bear the sight of the coffin containing the corpse of his other victim; even if indirectly, he had been the cause of the desperate widower's death.

Derek had to find proofs to confirm his suspicions.

His only reason for finding the true culprit though, was to provide the victim with a special treatment, an atrocious exclusive agony.

The task was quite difficult for the clown had always been a solitary guy and extremely reserved. Even most of his performances were solos.

He was a perfect blend of laughter and dark humour and ended up both amusing and disturbing the audience with his jerky movements and obscure jests. He never appeared clumsy nor made the familiar funny faces. The lips would simply curl in a sad smile that sometimes looked more like a sneering grimace.

Derek began spying on the clown and quite often stood peeping through the windows of his trailer; other times he knocked at the door.

George always arrived, staggering, with a half full glass. He would let him in almost complacently, take out another glass and fill it up with beer or cheap wine.

"You seem quite down," Derek remarked one time. "Perhaps something is troubling you…"

"When you lose the person you love, you end up like me, a miserable wreck," George replied.

Was that a half confession?

"What happened to that person?"

The clown looked at him strangely; then he filled up the glasses once again and remained silent. Sufferance was seeping from all pores, directly from his heart; it was so deep that no words could be uttered.

Such profound grief in a murderer was dismaying; the guy was certainly making it up with the intent to side-track him.

Acting was what the clown knew best, besides killing, concluded the young acrobat. Luckily he had become smart and wicked.

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Now Derek had to proceed with his cruel plans. His parents had been waiting long enough.

At last they would be revenged and the circus freed from those terrifying monsters. Afterwards he would leave definitely.

Most clowns didn't have a family and lived alone; others were travelling performers who never stayed too long with the same community. That simplified everything.

Derek began by slaying an Italian one. The acrobat easily managed to creep into the trailer the guy was sharing with another partner. The task turned out to be quite simple for the clown was alone and already drowsy. An empty bottle of wine was lying on the floor beside him.

Hurriedly, the criminal took out his knife and stabbed the poor fellow before he could realise what was going on. Then he chopped off his fingers and disfigured the face as homage to his mother. When the deed was accomplished, he got rid of the corpse.

Everyone was convinced that the clown had left in search of a new place and better offers and didn't bother much about his disappearance.

The delirious fever and perverse satisfaction had been such that Derek decided to act again without delay.

This time the crime took place in the little tent where the beautiful aerialist had been brutally slain. After the show when all lights were off and the other performers had retired to their trailers, Derek happened to see one of the clowns entering. He followed him hurriedly; while the fellow was searching for something he must have lost when changing, the blade penetrated his back. With a horrid cry, he dropped to the floor accompanied by the acrobat's cruel laughter. Then, with the same gory ritual, his mother was avenged once again.
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The murders of the clowns originated a general psychosis among the circus people. All were persuaded that a hideous presence was hovering and wondered who would be the next victim. The clowns in particular had become very cautious; they never hung out alone and always kept their trailer door securely locked. Some had even decided to leave the circus, stating that the place had become too dangerous and perhaps, even haunted.

Consequently, Derek encountered more difficulties in carrying out his evil plans.

The acrobat however, by now totally insane and prey of the most perverse delirium, wanted George, quite certainly the true responsible of his parents' death, as his next victim. Inflamed by sadistic folly, he amused himself with the thought of his imminent gruesome deed.

His obsession turned into a real persecution. George began avoiding him; the murders of the other clowns had made him uncomfortable as well and suspicions arose easily; only now and then he would let him into his trailer.

On one of those occasions, Derek asked if he knew his mother. He wanted the truth before that horrid mouth would be shut forever.

Unexpectedly the clown broke in tears.

On seeing the big drops falling on his still painted cheeks, the acrobat grew wild with rage and without waiting for a reply, shouted, "Of course you knew my mother, you killed her!"

The man looked at him, startled.

"You feel guilty but it's too late now, you bloody monster!"

"Wait, son," he tried to explain, "I… I loved your mother-

"I was sure of it!" cried Derek, triumphant.

"And she loved me… She used to paint my face, make my mouth smile even if it was a sad smile… for I couldn't have her."

"That's enough, you dirty clown!" The murderer added, "You killed both my parents and now I am going to slay you like I did with your other friends!"

He took out the knife and stuck it in his victim's chest.

Blood began spouting all around and the poor fellow tumbled to the floor.
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Seeing that he was still breathing, Derek shouted, “As soon as you’re dead, I’ll cut your fingers off and disfigure your face, man, just like you did to my mother!”

Wicked laughter followed; the raving psycho was already upon him when the clown slowly raised his hand and with feeble breath, uttered, “Your father killed her; wild with jealousy he disfigured her face and chopped off her fingers to punish her for what she had done.”

“You’re lying!” cried Derek blinded by the sharp truth and struck him violently.

After one last hollow rattle, the clown was ready for the macabre ritual.

THE RED THUMBS OF UNCLE TICKLE

Ken L Jones

No one really knows the truth about me
I am the fellow they call U.T.
They think I did that thing I did for no good reason
But they are quite out of their heads
And can known no pleasing
I am the product of a long fermented rot
Once I wanted only good things
Worked hard and struggled
But all for naught
I sacrificed all opera for to sing
I was good but could not accomplish that simple thing
And so in sadness was seduced against my will
Never to be the great tenor
Singing Pagliacci trills.
But instead a clown to kids on some TV screen
And even now it all makes me scream
But I thought I didn't care back then
And that cheap success and worldly wealth
Could beat the true artist out of me
Or at least put it away on a high shelf
But most of all I did it
To please the only woman I could ever love
My Honey Bear whose breasts were like fluttering doves
But little did I know of her true nature
And how she squandered her affections
With my friends and even total strangers
And then when the IRS stripped me bare
And my show was cancelled
And all my wife's sins cause the public to openly stare
How could I but help to do exactly as I have done
My silencing of the innocents
Who trusted me with my tommy gun
And all on live TV before

The unbelieving eyes of children everywhere
And of moms and dads and the public worldwide
And now my show continues
In a slightly different form
But just as funny
And still a veritable laugh storm
From coast to coast
I still indulge in my mirth and glee
Leaving behind my red thumb fingerprints
As my testimony even more of artist than I once was
Even if I now paint my masterpieces in other's blood
So trust no clowns that you ever meet
Who knows they might be
Every kid's best friend U.T.

TENDING ANIMALS

J.R. Roper

This week had been one of the shittiest of Jeff's life, but not the worst. He'd been shoveling and sweeping the stuff since the beginning of the county fair and finally, tomorrow, it would end. Strange he hadn't hated the job or the animals. Nope. He'd made plans for the future after this week. Get his GED. Community college. And finally University. Become a certified vet, yes-sir, he would.

Jeff took a hose and started to rinse down the wash bay. The show animals were all done and soon he'd be finished with soaked shoes and shit-splatter covering his pants.

"Missed a spot." The voice was raspy.

Jeff turned to find Buffalo, the head grounds-keeper, leaning against the fence smoking a cigarette. Jeff shrugged and continued to spray the concrete, aiming foamy brown swirl toward the drain.

"I said you missed a spot, you stupid sonuvabitch."

Buffalo chucked his cigarette and yanked the hose from Jeff's hands. Heat rose to Jeff's forehead. He wanted to beat the fat ass to a bloody pulp and rinse him down the drain. But he couldn't. He needed this recommendation for his next job.

"Sorry, sir."

Buffalo sprayed a spot for several seconds that had already been cleaned and thrust the hose into Jeff's hand. "This place better be spotless when I come back." Buffalo wiped his hands on his pants, lit another cigarette and moseyed out of the wash bay.

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An hour later, Jeff moved on to the main aisle in the cow barn.

Buffalo returned to taunt him for not cleaning the wash bay properly. "Redo it tomorrow," he said.

Jeff just shrugged and scraped the aisle for the fair-goers who'd be pouring in tonight for the grand finale of the fair—the part Jeff had always wanted to see as a kid but never could. His parents didn't hold with such nonsense. Tonight the circus came to the fair and not just any circus, the
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world traveling Clowns of Marne. Most people hated clowns, but not these ones. Kicked their fine legs high like Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders, yes-sir, they did.

He'd be close to the circus tonight. Very close. But he'd be working. Buffalo had told him to forget about it. 'One slip,' he'd said, 'and you can guarantee no reference.'

Jeff was short on good references, sure. He'd swept the floors at Millbrook Tool for about a week, but that didn't last—too slow, they'd told him. He'd mowed lawns for Greenland Landscaping and cut the grass too short.

But this week was different. Mom had said not to mess up this one. And he didn't plan to, no-sir. Jeff started at the end of the barn with the big steers and pitched the shit into a wheelbarrow. Done with that, he filled all the water pails and fed a few who'd been neglected by their owners. See, the feeding was the only part the kids were still made to do and even that was too much for some of the brats.

Jeff moved on to the horse barn. He started with his favorite Clydesdale, Pearl. He slowly rested a hand on her rump to let her know he was there. Her sweaty-sweet scented coat felt warm under his touch. He brushed his hand down her sunken back and tousled her cream hair before taking her water pail for filling. The horses were his favorite.

After he'd finished with the horses, the crowds were starting to stream in for the circus. Jeff went to the chicken barn to finish his required chores, then he'd be checking water and bedding for the rest of the night. A few 4-H kids were still there. Jeff took the push broom and started on the aisles.

The kids had huddled in a corner and after a short burst of laughter, they went silent. Jeff looked up at them and they laughed again. His hands began to sweat and his face warmed, but he ignored them and continued to sweep.

"Something stinks worse than the chickens!" a dark-haired girl said.

Laughter filled the barn, blazed in Jeff's ears. He stopped and squeezed the broom handle with both hands. Tears stung the edges of his eyes, so he closed them.

"Izzy Smith, what are you doing here? Get to the camper and change. The circus starts in less than an hour." A woman stood over the group of kids and pointed toward the door.

Jeff opened his eyes in time to see the girl who'd made the comment glance in his direction.

"I thought someone better look-out for the chickens." Izzy stared at Jeff and then her mother.

He'd expected the mother to chastise the girl. Tell her she was rude. That mean was a sin, yes-sir. But she didn't. She leaned down, whispered into Izzy's ear and they walked away laughing at him.

Jeff lifted the broom and stepped toward them. The rest of the kids screamed and bolted. Alone, he threw the broom into the corner and sat on a bench, his head in his hands. He tried to control his shuddering shoulders, but it was no use.

A hand touched his arm. "Come now. Brats will get what's coming to them." The woman's voice was sweet.

Jeff looked up. It was a clown. Black streamed from her dead-grey eyes to her mouth as if they were bleeding. Her hair was a mix of red and black needles. From her lean figure she could be a model.

"Been looking for you all day," the clown said.

Jeff straightened. "Me?"

"Yes, you—have something for you from me and the girls." She reached into her bra.

Jeff's heart rate quickened and he couldn't pull his eyes away. She handed him a piece of paper.

The words swirled on the paper. "What is it?"

"Special ticket to the stage."

It seemed like she was smiling, but it was difficult to tell beneath the painted curvy lips.

Jeff's shoulders sagged. "Can't. I gotta work."

"Old Buff will understand." She patted him on the shoulder and turned to leave.

"But what do I-"

"Give that to the red clown. He'll tell you how to find me." She disappeared.

Jeff held the ticket like an athlete his medal. Was she right? Would Buffalo understand? Didn't matter, did it? This was his chance at the circus.

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The barns had cleared and the flow from the parking lot decreased to a few stragglers hurrying toward the grandstands. Buffalo was nowhere in sight. Probably feeling up some carny on the backside of a barn. Jeff went to a water spigot and washed his hands, splashed water onto his arms and his face. He gave himself a good sniff, but couldn't tell if he stunk. Cheers from the stands. The circus had started already. Should he even go? What would Buffalo say? Mom was always saying to think long term. Like the time he'd smacked-up a boss. The bastard deserved it.

Jeff stared at his ticket for a moment and began walking toward the grandstands. He strode past the food booths; the smell of deep fried everything coating the air. He gave the game-hecklers a leave-me-the-hell-alone look. When he got to the gate, a smallish clown waved him forward. He handed her his ticket.

She glanced at the ticket and then at Jeff before chuckling. "What's this?"

Jeff's forehead burned. He'd been played. His gaze fell to the ground. "A clown gave it to me."

"A clown from here?"

"Yes."

The clown scratched her cheek. "I hate this paint, it itches," she said.

"Red clown. Told me to give it to the red clown."

The ticket-taker looked toward the circus and yelled, "Murphy!"

A clown with a baggy red suit and blue hair framing a pasty-white face plodded toward them. "Yeah?"

"Said to see you." She held up the ticket.

Murphy clapped his hands. "You made it, Mr. Cezon."

Jeff stepped back. "How do you know me?"

Murphy approached quickly and took Jeff by the arm. For a sloppy plodder, Murphy was strong. "You're well known to us, Jeffrey."

Jeffrey? No one had called him that since elementary. A shiver of worry ran over Jeff's scalp. What was this? Some kind of prank by the demons of his past? If they messed with him, he'd smash their noses, yes-sir, he would.

He walked next to Murphy, whom he assumed would lead him to a special seat of some kind in the grandstands. The crowd of mostly families buzzed with excitement and it felt like everyone was staring at the back of Jeff's neck. Murphy pulled him across the open area for the production and

to the stage set behind it. The MC, a tall thin man in a white suit, announced to the crowd that the guest of honor had arrived. Everyone cheered loudly.

Jeff fought the smile that had forced itself across his face like a squid wrapping tentacles around a victim. Murphy left him next to the MC, who placed a hand on Jeff's thick shoulder.

“"You ready for the night of your life, young man?”

Jeff nodded enthusiastically and stared at the scuffed stage in front of him.

“Are you ready?” the MC bellowed to the crowd.

Kids screamed and parents failed at quieting them for several long seconds.

Jeff looked up and saw Izzy Smith glaring at him from the front row. He gave her a toothy grin and held up his arms as if he'd just won the Olympics.

The crowd cheered again as Jeff was ushered to a throne-like chair on the side of the stage. From here he saw everything: stilt walkers, juggling clowns, a fire-breather whose heat nearly singed his eyebrows. Then came the animals.

A troupe of monkeys did simple tricks and handed flowers to kids in the stands. A dog named Super Steve climbed an obstacle course. A chubby pig took part in a disappearing trick. Finally, the moment Jeff had been waiting for—the clowns.

This was the part that brought in the dads. Jeff immediately spotted the girl who'd given him the ticket, she winked at him several times during the performance. The ladies danced to hip-hop music, formed a kicking line and tossed the small clowns into the air—gasps from the crowd punctuating each near-miss.

The MC announced that this was the final act of the night and immediately several clowns pulled Jeff from his throne. They led him to a special bench and laid him on it. Several of the women draped their bodies over him, covered him completely.

“And now,” the MC boomed, “our guest of honor will disappear.”

The crowd shouted louder than it had all night. Disappear? They wanted him gone! Jeff tried to sit up, but he was pinned. He felt himself falling and when he landed, he felt the wind forced out of his lungs, leaving him stunned. He was in a dark room. Alone. Above, feet stomped and

shuffled across the stage. He tried to roll over, but hit a wooden wall. He tried the other way and found he was encased. A casket.

"Hello?"

No response.

Jeff's heart thumped. It might've vibrated the floor above. He placed his arms against the walls and pushed with all his might. He was strong, yes-sir. A brute, some called him. But the sides didn't budge. He took a deep breath and then another. Was he running out of oxygen? His armpits prickled with cold and his head gushed with nervous sweat.

"Let me out. Please, someone."

For a moment, no one came. Then he heard something to his right, like the turn of a latch.

"Hold on. Almost time to play."

The word *play* made him shudder. Light flooded in from his right and a hand pulled him out of the box.

All was dark save the white paint on the clown's face. From the voice he knew it was the same woman who'd given him the ticket.

"Scary, that," Jeff said with a laugh.

The clown's smile seemed to grow. The sight froze Jeff, rooted him to the spot.

"What the hell's going on?"

More clowns appeared. Surrounded him. They were closing in and he felt their breath on his arms, legs, and neck. But he couldn't move.

Their smiles. Their damn smiles were everywhere. Now teeth. Sharpened teeth gleamed in the faint light.

This was it for Jeff, he told himself. The end. He had to fight. He was big enough to kill these pansies. "Out of my way!"

The teeth seemed to grow larger and raucous laughter forced him to cover his ears. Jeff lowered his head and barreled. He felt bodies bounce off him as he drove forward. Within moments he'd broken through and was running for all he was worth.

Ahead was a stream of light. It had to be the door. Jeff ran as fast as he could and the door frame became clear. He could make it. Escape.

Then he tripped. It was something large and squishy and he face-planted into moist dirt. He turned to see what he'd tripped over. A body, naked and grotesque. The face was bloody and mutilated and the body

gashed and flayed. But the person's identity was unmistakable. Hanging from his mouth, like the top of a broken stem, was a cigarette. Buffalo.

Jeff looked up and saw nothing but smiles. Demented and horrible smiles. He screamed as loudly as he could. Screamed. Outside the crowd cheered. Did they know he was being murdered? Where they happy? Izzy Smith probably was.

Without hesitating, Jeff grabbed hold of the nearest clown and drove the bitch upward as hard as he could. She screamed and he slammed her again. Then he took her face and smashed it with his forehead. The clown went limp and he reached for the next one.

Teeth sunk into the back of his neck and pressure with the force of a lion's jaw threatened to sever his head. Jeff flopped onto his back, crushing the attacker beneath his immense weight. The bite loosened and Jeff ran.

He was backstage in no time and sprinting toward the barns. Where could he go? The horses. That was it. They'd protect him. He glanced back but was not being pursued. He touched the back of his neck and his hand was slick with blood.

When he entered the barn, the horses whinnied loudly and trampled straw. Jeff took a rag used for wiping them down and pressed it against his neck.

He placed a hand on Pearl, but she recoiled at his touch and moved as far away as possible. "It's me, girl," he said, expecting her to calm but she didn't.

Jeff glanced at the doors. No one had followed him. His neck throbbed and he felt the rag become sticky. He needed to get to his truck and to a hospital. He'd never finish closing down the barns, but no boss would be there to call him a dumbass tomorrow. After the hospital, he'd go to the police. Jeff looked at Pearl and noticed the flex in her muscles.

His stomach growled. He hadn't eaten in hours and now he was losing blood. That was it. Warmth spread from his neck to his head and slowly crept down, toward his chest. Jeff strode toward the parking lot, glancing to make sure the clowns weren't near.

No one was there. The place had emptied after the circus. Damn it, no one was there to help him. Jeff moved quickly through the chicken barn until he heard a loud squawk. He stopped and looked. A chicken cowered in the corner of its cage. Above the cage was the owner's name, Izzy Smith.

Warmth had spread throughout Jeff’s body and his stomach pained him worse than his neck. He was hungry. Desperately hungry. He moved toward the chicken and his body flooded with excitement, as if it had a mind of its own and willed him to take it. Eat it.

He unlatched the cage and grabbed the chicken by the neck. The excitement grew like this was the pinnacle moment of his life. A hand rested on his shoulder.

The woman’s voice was soft, "Welcome to the circus. This is where you belong."

THE WOE IN BALLOONS OF ADVANCING AGE

Ron Koppelberger

Surely the approval of his family affirmed the storm, the torrent of tide and time. He was three hundred and twenty-seven years old and the shelter of myth was deeply entrenched in his dreamy, dauntless eyes. Scarlet reflections of confident measure, the spell was genuine and the irises were a portent of bidden and unbidden blood.

The eligible maiden was chaste and in sound bloom, flourishing in whispers of wild rumor and scarlet passage. He postured and declared the alignment of the balloons and his pledge, his promise of betrothal and sovereign duty. A king evermore and a queen chosen by lot, she was naive and youthful nonetheless; he would live to see her grow old and seasoned. He had laid five loves to rest and the dye of eternity bore its burden on his heart. The woe in balloons of destiny, they would flutter and float toward heaven, alabaster, ivory and cream colored, like angels in flight. He brooded and bothered a moment then signaled for the balloons. They drifted upward forever and in sunshine, blessings of harvest and the fools and clowns danced with the joy of the world to be. The clowns of pretending good fortune and the vast array of balloons frolicked and cavorted to the rhythm of Gods and kings. Clowns, fools and balloons to mark the passage of tide and time. The harvest of notion and symptom, the brilliance of the moment pointed toward the new queen and the kiss of an ancient king.

The harvest of saffron skies and eternal wheat bloom argued the age of plenty and the ebony keep of smoked glass shimmered with the bustle of a new marriage.

WHY ARE YOU HERE?

Neil Leckman

It was happening again. I was sitting in front of a room full of people, all clowns, but not happy ones, not a one. Something seemed inherently sinister in the frowns on all of those pasty white faces. The man with purple hair dressed as a clown, sitting in the judge's podium, slammed his inflated hammer down hard on its wooden base.

BOOM!!

Confetti blasted out of the hammer and obscured the faces of the crowd that sat staring at me.

"WELL?"

"I don't understand the question"

Through the glittering confetti I saw glowing eyes, angry eyes and wondered what I was being tried for. I couldn't see the walls because there was an infinite sea of faces that went off into the distance. At least that is what I saw when the confetti began to settle. Multi-colored bright hair wigs and white faces with bright red lips and glowing eyes, accusing eyes. For the life of me I had no idea why I was in the chair answering questions from an audience of clowns.

I woke feeling exhausted and shuffled into the shower. I noticed an almost ghostly scent of cotton candy as I turned on the water, then the humidity and steam washed it away. I noticed but ignored the light pink color that swirled down the drain as I shampooed. After I ate breakfast, I went out and waited for the morning bus with the other people at the bus stop, business men and women for the most part. I stepped up into the bus and looked down, I saw the man still waiting for the next bus had very large shoes on, then the doors closed. Sitting there listening to the drone of the bus as it traveled through midtown traffic I nodded off.

BOOM!!

Confetti blossomed everywhere and I woke with a start as the bus stopped suddenly for a pedestrian that had stepped out in front of it. Still groggy from lack of sleep, I looked around at the other passengers, most of who looked as sleepy as I felt. I was nodding off again when I saw a hint of pink hair under the bonnet of the women that had stepped out in front of the bus. Today was the first day at my new job and I had hoped to give a great

impression, but in my state of half wakefulness I was sure to come across as someone who was mentally deficient.

"Why are you here?" a voice asked, startling me out of my semi wakefulness.

It was the guard at the front desk of the building that housed my new job. I told him it was my first day and wasn't sure where the Human Resources office was so I could report in and finish the last of my new hire orientation and paperwork. He looked at me in an odd way for a moment, as if in judgment, then the illusion passed and he gave me directions to the fifth floor HR suite that handled all new hires. I thanked him, walked over to the elevator and pressed the button.

When the elevator doors opened I stepped in and stood towards the back, next to two men in expensive looking business suits. Nobody spoke as we rode the elevator up, until the doors opened on the fifth floor and I got out. As I stepped past the two men in business suits I smelled cotton candy again and, in the reflection off the chrome walls of the elevator, they looked like they were wearing puffy suits with wide multicolored stripes. I stood there, stunned, as the doors swooshed shut inches in front of my face. I looked up and saw an arrow pointing towards the Human Resources office.

The rest of the day seemed like a blur and before I knew it I was riding the bus back home again.

I sat on the crowded bus next to an old woman who had a bag of groceries from the farmer's market clutched tightly in her lap. I fell asleep to the smell of fresh vegetables and had a pleasant dream about when I was young and lived on the farm with my parents. I lived there until the accident that killed them both on the way home from the circus late one hot August night. I was in the back seat but I don't remember the accident at all, or the circus, for that matter. They said I struck my head pretty hard when the car rolled down the ravine and landed in a shallow stream at the bottom.

Like a fog lifting I began to remember the circus and how much fun it was. There was an odd underlying feeling of dread, though, as the dream played out, watching the people on the high wire as they performed without a net and the gasps as they came close to falling several times. Then I told my dad I needed to use the bathroom and I felt tension like a wire tighten even more. In the dimly lit portable bathroom nothing happened. I walked out and heard laughing and muffled talking close by. Sneaking over I found

a small tear in the fabric of the tent and peaked inside. The clowns were all there taking off their clothes and makeup.

"I think the show went well tonight, and we got a bonus," one clown said as he walked over to a large trunk and opened it. Inside was a boy about my age, gagged and tied up, eyes wide with fear.

"He doesn't look too happy to be behind the scenes with the clowns. I thought kids liked clowns," a large clown said as he wiped off the white makeup on his face. Beneath was a layer of pale dead skin, covered in sores like bright red pock marks, each oozing a trickle of brown liquid, thick like molasses. One of his eyes was droopy and white, the skin hanging in loose folds. I must have gasped because all the clowns turned and looked at where I was peeking in, and that clown was pretty compared to what the others looked like. I ran back to my parents and hustled them along to our car since the show was over. As we passed a couple of clowns that were doing tricks for children, one of them leaned in close and whispered to me, "We know who you are and we'll be coming for you, if not now, then later. You can never escape us."

I was in hysterics in the car on the way home and that was why my dad didn't see the other car in time to avoid hitting it and lost control. I was grabbing at the wheel in panic and struggling with him when he came around the corner and there was another car coming straight at us, I killed my own parents!!

I jumped awake and found myself sitting in front of a room full of clowns. "Why are you here?"

"Because I know what you really are and I killed my own parents!!" I yelled back at the clown who sat at the judge's podium.

He smiled and as he did, the corners of his mouth stretched much further than humanly possible, showing me a mouth full of jagged teeth. In front of me the faces of the clowns began to melt and as their features flowed from their faces my sanity also flowed away, leaving a screaming shell…

RETRIBUTION 2: “SORRY OUT OF SERVICE”

Shane Ward

One feels a sense of power when they drive a twelve-tonne vehicle around the streets of London. Ray knew that if he decided to hit one of those lowlifes on the road, he would escape unharmed. But he couldn’t do that. He was a professional and today was no different.

Day in and day out he would go to work, do his rounds and return home to his empty house with a fish tank in the corner with his new addition to the pack, the angel fish he collected from Dave’s house.

When he cracked open the fish food and sprinkled the flakes over the surface of the water, he thought back to the night he invaded the man’s house.

Now, that was a man who deserved what he got and Ray loved dressing for the occasion. But once that initial adrenaline rush had left his body, he was alone once again with his trusty clown uniform and red plastic nose. It was a routine for him to dress for the kill, not to disguise himself from the authorities, but to demonstrate that a clown’s appearance was more than just funny jokes and smart stunts. The clown was the ultimate terror and he loved the novelty. He wanted to put the red back into the image of a clown. He found it thrilling, even when he was a young man terrified of clowns. One could almost think he was a clown inside, waiting to come out.

However, no matter how he tried to display the funny side of his actions, no one laughed when he strangled the life out of Dave. It was a disappointing end to a carefully thought up plan. But it was devised in a hurry. Nothing funny comes from rushing.

The next morning, after his nightly duties, Dave failed to return to work. No one cared, nor did they investigate the manager’s disappearance. Everybody was the same and wanted one thing: to work, get paid and return home to their loved ones.

Then, several days later when news got out about Dave being dead, everyone acted their part with cries of, “Dave was such a good man.” Or “He did not deserve to die like that.”

Bullshit! Ray thought to himself.

Everyone wanted that man dead and their cool composure only made the whole situation appear more professional than a circus act. He loved it

and relished its insanity.

The police came to the garage a few times to interrogate all the drivers who might have had altercations with the man. He was one of the three hundred employees questioned over and over again but luckily for him, the CCTV system in the garage was so bad; it failed to record his secret stalking and arguments, which helped in Dave's execution.

Of course Ray had to lie through his teeth, he confessed that he did not get on well with Dave and many other drivers had their fair share of arguments with him. But it was his emotional act that drew attention away from the truth. In the end he was an expert at acting and the police were forced to leave the garage and focus their thoughts on Dave's gay friend who turned out, quite conveniently, to be the suspect.

Yes, the aftermath was rather interesting and, after a few months of prodding and hiding, Ray was finally able to do what he did best, stalk the streets of London and find his next target.

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Ray had closely observed every one of the passengers on his bus from Swiss Cottage all the way to Oxford Street and confidently concluded that three of the young women at the front of the bus were foreigners with no clue where to go. He had seen it many times in the past and loved the way they looked around with their tour maps and bewildered expressions.

As they seemed to be Oriental in nature, he surmised that they were from China. He preferred Japanese women because they were so childlike and acted with an open mind, but Chinese were a welcome substitute.

Of course there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't leave his fully loaded bus at the side of the road and pounce on the three beauties. That would be crazy and irresponsible. No, this exercise was for his mind because Ray had an active imagination that needed to be nourished from time to time. He needed stimulation and finding targets on his routes was the perfect opportunity to do this. It kept him fresh and stable.

He imagined stalking the streets at night and picking up the three Oriental women. It would be easy for them to get on his bus because no one expected a red vehicle to harbor danger.

Once he had them in his trap he would pull over at the side of the road and conduct his terrible deed. The young women would be vibrant,
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succulent, just waiting to be taken. He would hound them to the top deck where there was no escape. From there, he could take his time, penetrate each one without mercy and then execute them in a slow and plausible way, *yeah… the perfect job.*

But in the end, it was just fantasy, he wanted the real thing.

The trip took fifty-five minutes of his mundane day before he was able to return to the garage and sign off. His drive in his old banger was uneventful, despite a police cruiser following him home half the way. He prayed to god that his insurance was up to date because he didn't want a car search that would have brought up the assortment of tools and parts he kept in the boot; "Try explaining that to the cops," he smirked as he turned the final corner.

Once his vehicle was parked in the driveway, Ray opened his door and stepped out into the blistering sunlight. It had been a wet start to the day so the trees and grass around his home carried an after smell that was pleasing to his senses. But none of that would hide the smell that was in the boot of his car.

He hadn't killed anyone today; he hadn't kill anyone for a long time, since Dave kicked the bucket. "Too right too, I should have taken that asshole home and kept his head as a trophy."

Then again, the last thing he wanted was his boss's head looking at him every time he visited his cellar. Dealing with him once was enough; it would be crazy to have the man haunt him after death.

Now Ray had to plan his next masterpiece. He preferred not to just go out on the run and hack up any old person he came across. No, killing Dave was a spur of the moment. It was a bodged up job, kind of like a carpenter nailing a shelf the wall and saying it was sturdy.

Returning to reality, Ray spotted the attractive blond neighbor entering her house and slid the keys into his door lock. He imagined himself sliding something else into her before he entered his house. But he kept his thoughts on other things. He had a master plan to create; he was a clown after all. All clowns needed plans, places to be and people to see. He was going to bring a smile to everyone's faces before he went out with a bang. The city of London was growing tired of his actions and it was time he preformed his big finale before he left for Scotland.

The plan was simple, he allocated himself a night bus duty because most of the controllers were at home then and he could disable the systems

on the bus so he could use it for his own personal gain. Despite all the new advances in tracking technology and GPS, all that was useless unless someone reported the thing missing. He would have several hours at best before his shift ended and he would be far away before anyone knew his name was fake and his details falsified.

The next stage of his plan would be to prepare his clown costume and make up. He wanted to give everyone a blast of a time but he could not waltz into work wearing it. He would be kicked out before he even made it to the door. He praised himself on his intellect and decided to park his rusty old banger near the shopping center next to the bus stop before he started his work.

Everything was perfect and then he heard someone talking outside his bedroom window.

"Don't worry, honey, I'll hang these out and cook lunch."

It was the hot blond next door.

Ray rolled his chair over to the window and peeked through the blinds that isolated his world from prying eyes. It worked perfectly for him because from the top floor of his house he could see the cute mother of two hanging clothes next to his house. The gardens were secluded, perfect for his spying. With a glass of whisky in his left hand and something personal of hers on his right, he watched as she hung towels and clothing, nothing wrong with that.

Her children's clothes were standard: pants, shirts, then her husband's clothes and then her clothing…

Her clothing.

Stockings, bras, his heart began to race when she picked up a pair of her frilly light pink underwear and pegged it to the line, he knew exactly how it felt, he knew how it smelt.

She used to have two of them.

But now she had one!

"You know, I still haven't found my other pair of panties, are you sure you didn't throw them out, honey?" she said when she returned to the house with her basket. "I know they were a gift from you on Valentine's Day, but..."

"Don't worry about it, honey I'm sure it'll…" The male's voice was suddenly cut off when the neighbor's door closed, drowning the area in silence.

Her underwear in his hands, Ray smelt the vibrant scent and then tucked it inside his pants to continue with his master plan.

His plan… nourished by her scent.

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The next day the plan was on. He had successfully parked his vehicle near the bus stop in the busy supermarket and ignored the sign that said ‘maximum stay two hours or your vehicle will be clamped.’ At least it wouldn’t be towed away. It didn’t matter; he’d be traveling to Scotland on the train anyway.

Once he left his car, he boarded the next bus to his garage and sat at the back, away from customers. He wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible. The driver remained silent and he liked that. Most drivers would chat and discuss who dodged the fare, who argued and who called the police. Ray did not see any point in these idle conversations. He just wanted to remain in his own little world.

When the bus pulled into the garage, he offered his thanks and made his way to the reception to sign on.

Logging on was easy; watching the new CCTV cameras go up around the place was not. It was new to him. The garage changed all the time, but this was beyond normal. A lot of new faces came and went. New rules and notices plastered all over the place. But this latest change was beyond him and it only cemented his decision to leave London and travel to Scotland. He had some idea of what he wanted to do, but with the new cameras going up, he had to act fast and leave before they went online. The new CCTV system was state of the art, night vision, auto focus that could record his face and lead the authorities to identify him. He had stayed one step ahead of him, although he put this down to luck and the police preferring to penalize speeding motorists than to catch serial killers.

Then someone interrupted him. Ray turned; it was a skinny driver who went by the name Jolly, because he always smiled.

“Hey Ray, did you hear the latest? The police think someone in this garage might have killed Dave.”

Jolly had caught Ray’s attention. He stopped in mid stride and turned towards him. “What do you mean?”
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Ray wasn't sure if the police had caught up to him already. If that was the case then perhaps they really do work on murder cases and not traffic.

"Police say that he had a altercation with several drivers before he was murdered. The cops would like to question thirty people again at the end of the day."

Ray moved closer, adjusting his position so he could make a run for it if he had to, force of habit.

"Well, I'm sure most of the people here would love to have seen him dead. What make them sure it was a driver and not a member of his family? I heard his gay friend was pretty jealous of him getting a girl."

"Did he really?"

"Yeah, I saw his girl drop him off a few months ago."

Ray saw more than that.

He saw them kissing.

He saw condoms on the counter when he killed that asshole.

Dave was a two timing asshole, although he didn't care.

"I heard he's an ex-cop, that's why the police have taken an extra interest in the killer."

Ray rubbed the back of his neck, not because he was sweating under the hot sun, it was because something bit him. "An ex-cop? Don't make me laugh, why would he work in a shitty place if he was?"

"I don't know, but you know how shady people are here. Just last week, the newspapers reported a child sex offender working the school run in this place. He had to leave so fast he didn't have the time to pay in his fares."

Ray looked surprised; he was supposed to be the sick one!

He made his way towards the canteen with his friend following. He did not like that. He wanted to be alone.

"So, what's your duty? Do you have to see the police when you sign off?"

"Fuck if I'm going to do that. Once I'm signed out, I'm going home."

"But you have to."

"They'll have to arrest me first." Ray stood firm in his actions. His tone reflected this. Jolly stepped back at the sharp words.

Ray ordered a cup of tea and a packet of crisps and waited in line before he could leave. His thoughts raced, the spur of the moment attack

and the reckless murder, he should have been careful, but he wanted to get his thrill tonight. He had a need and it was time to quench it.

"I get paid to work my hours and go home. If the police want to talk to me, they can do it during my duty. I'm not the one to volunteer my services for that asshole. He deserved to die."

Ray wasn't sure if his little speech was over the top. It didn't require security cameras to pick up their conversations because there were plenty of snitches in the garage that would happily report his speech to the managers. After all, everybody wanted a promotion and snitching each other up was the fastest way there. That's how Dave had got the position in the first place. As a driver he was the biggest snitch of them all, stories flowing from his rear end as well as his mouth.

"You're right on, mate. Chicken roll please…" Jolly said, mixing his sentence with an order.

Ray stirred the teabag in the cup, rinsed the golden liquid from the bag and binned it. With a steady hand, he held the jug of milk and poured himself a sizable portion into the polystyrene cup. With the bag of crisps in his spare hand, he offered Jolly his farewell and left for his bus. He could have stayed and chatted some more, but he had little time. The police would be on his tail soon and he knew there was time for his final performance before he left for America. Scotland seemed too risky now.

He had a plan for America.

He liked American women, they fought back.

Well, in the movies they did.

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It was 3am and the shift was progressing nicely. No problems. No police and no children. Just the way he liked it.

The streetlights in this part of town had not been updated for some time. All the other councils had installed energy saving lights that lit up every corner and saved energy. England and its greenhouse obsession.

But this part of the street only had the old fashioned lights that radiated a dirty orange glow which lit up the sky instead of the pavement and corners. He approached that bus stop where his vehicle had been parked like he'd done twice already. From his observations the only tampering was
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the parking tickets it had accumulated over the hours. He was sure the parking warden should have issued one ticket, but five was over the top.

But that didn't matter; on his way back he would have to take his bus out of service and dress for his big show. From his calculations, crowds of students would leave university late this evening and they would be the perfect targets. If everything went according to plan, this incident would be the most deadly in the history of London. He smiled at his own brilliance and his need could hinge on the many women he would have at his disposal.

But first he had to set up the bus for the mass of students.

When he arrived at his destination, he ended his trip and turned off all the lights. He saw three people waiting at the bus stop ready to board his bus. His was the last one and they needed him to drive them home.

Not today.

He ran the bus 'out of service' and watched in the rear-view mirror as everyone stood with shocked, angry expressions. He even saw a few on the phone to complain. *They can go to hell; I've got better things to do.*

With the lighting around the streets at a steady level, Ray could have dozed of at the wheel. He'd been sleepy through his duty, but not now. Now he was filled with excitement.

Two bus stops later, he came to the one he needed. But he had to disable the radio first.

In the event of an emergency, the new radio system could track each bus and discover its location on the map, right down to the meter. So in a bid to hide his presence he opened up the electronic cupboard on the upper deck and began cutting wires to the radio system.

Normally this cupboard would be locked, but he had the key. An engineer left it on the bus a few months ago and he decided to keep it handy.

It was.

With the radio out, his bus was invisible and now he had to tamper with the CCTV.

Lucky for him, the CCTV unit was located in the same place as the radio. It used a standard disk to record everything and he removed the drive before continuing. This contained images of his face, but none of that mattered.

Damn… he thought to himself. Even if he was to hide the footage, the police could track him by the registration number of the bus and its own identification number.

Perhaps this was the time to leave. Perhaps this was the time to escape to America and forget this whole plan.

Then he saw a young woman walk past. Short black hair, tight miss sexy pants and a top that snuggled her cleavage perfectly. His manhood stood to attention and he instantly felt the urge, the desire… the need. It was so powerful he could not hold back. He had to feel it, he waited too long and the thought of all those university girls was too much, they were four stops away.

With his mind firmly on the mission, he pushed aside all rational thought and dived in like some possessed animal. He turned off all the lights on the bus, left for his car and brought back a dossal bag full of gear. He was about to begin his performance.

A toot here and a bong there, he was safe in his costume. Using the internal mirror, he plastered white paint over his face and carefully painted *that* smile to perfection. It needed to be, he installed the CCTV disk and everything was being recorded. He decided to have the whole thing on film. Someday his adventures would be recorded on YouTube and he could watch it forever. His legacy would live on like Jack the Ripper's.

He finally popped on his red nose and practiced his smile.

The smile that offered a warm, chilling, welcome to anyone who got on his bus.

It was the start of a new terror!

But he could not disable a whole crowd on his own. From deep within the confines of the bag, he pulled out a canister of gas. *Perfect*.

Its job was to paralyze everyone but he would be okay with his gasmask at his side. When the time came, everyone would be at his mercy, just the way he liked it. He chuckled at his own thoughts as he held the canister in his hands.

He pulled out a leather case filled with knives: Carving knives, delicate knives and hacksaws, all custom made for the craft.

He had a special gift.

The newspapers reported a large number of people missing during the months. No know knew why, but if someone takes an *out of service* bus

at night to home, they were asking for trouble. After all, it was too easy for the victim to come to the perpetrator!

He touched the cleaver knife gently and it cut his skin elegantly. Ray felt the sharp pain, resembling a paper cut. The stale small of the bus was annoying and he sprayed his air-freshener around. He planned everything. The stench of dead bodies would make a horrifying smell, people pissing each other, shitting, breaking wind… It would be a mess.

But he thought about the pleasures, the untold pleasures.

The hour was upon him.

One more trip.

One carefully constructed plan.

It would be difficult, but then they all were.

He could easily die.

But the thrill was too great, he had to try.

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The gas was rigged to the ventilation system for a fast delivery of nerve toxin. His mask was hidden beside the driver window for easy access and he changed the destination sign to the last station. After all, he wanted to look authentic.

He sat behind the wheel, started the engine and the bus began to roll down the road.

The first bus stop was empty.

The second stop was his first test. A hot dark haired woman stood there wearing a short skirt on her slender frame. She looked drunk and ready to do anything. She extended her hand and showed a rear end that would stop traffic. Ray had to stop, he had too.

She got in… Looked in shock and laughed.

Ray sat there and smiled…

The woman stopped laughing and appeared confused. Ray could see his appearance in the mirror. Even partly covered in darkness, his smile carried the message of death, the strange afterglow of danger. The ultimate terror hidden behind a screen of plastic and light. The woman felt danger, Ray knew it, but she equally felt oddly safe. She was on a London bus, lots of strange things happened, but a London bus was perfectly safe!
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Ray knew what she was thinking. He smiled some more and closed the door behind her.

She had to enter.

Victim number one.

The next stop harbored a man in his thirties, well built, looked like jack the lad. Tank top and shorts. *Asshole*

Ray pulled up to the stop. Not the perfect of drive ups; the front wheel hit the curb and nearly ran him over… *Mistake… ooss…*

The man boarded, angry. "Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing? Are all London-"

The stranger stopped in mid sentence and after a short pause, he burst out laughing…

"Clown!!! Why is there a clown driving the bus?" Laughter filled every corner of the bus. The woman giggled in the background and instantly caught the stranger's attention. The man walked away after swiping his card, his interest was now on other things.

That's right, I'll kill you first! Ray promised.

The next stop was the bonus one. He heard on the news that the local university was having an open day to promote the new departments the government had sponsored. Students who were picked to start next week were offered the place at the opening ceremony to present their case and offer thanks to the government officials who gave them money. Most of the students went for the drinks and free food; also it was a Friday night too.

Ray had inspected the place and managed to get hold of a list of people who would attend. He knew someone would be sacked for leaving confidential documents on the bus, but then again, there were a lot of people who left personal items on the bus. So far he managed to pocket five phones, twelve wallets, hundreds of oyster cards, over £200 in cash and an IPhone 5 over the years he had worked for the bus company.

Such a lovely job, people were giving themselves away.

Oh, he could see it now, the top of the red bus stop flag. The main stop was hidden under a small bend in the road, but when the lights change, he would have an unlimited supply of victims.

The lights remained red.

They stayed on red.

Ray tapped the steering wheel with his left finger.

He then tapped the floor with his right foot.

He wanted to do something. Perhaps run the red light.

But he couldn't. Ray thought about the rage, his actions the need, his smile. Ho his smile in the mirror, it always smiled back at him, his own face mocked him from afar.

There was a beep from behind; the light had already changed. He was free to go.

Ray pressed his foot on the accelerator and turned the bed… The bus stop would be his legacy…

The bus stop was…

Ray froze… Accelerating!!!

The stop was empty… No students…

No targets…

He drove to the next one.

Then the next!

No one…

The bell rang… The two passengers wanted to get off… He could not allow that. He failed in his plan, the clown face mocking him in the mirror. He saw himself laughing… the smile… He could not cope, he wanted to satisfy his urge, and he needed the two people… He must have them.

At the very first opportunity he would gas them; kill the man and rape the woman.

He drove on and missed the stop.

"Hey man! You missed the stop. What's wrong with you, did that clown outfit get to your mind?" The girl laughed in unison with the man and he could tell that the two had gotten to know each other while traveling on the bus. Chances were she liked him and was going home to get laid. What a lucky asshole. What an unlucky situation they're in.

Suddenly Ray had to brake hard. The girl fell over into the man;s arms and he burst out in a rage. "What's your fucking problem, driver? Your driving sucks, asshole, why don't you fuck a sheep, you weirdo." The man pressed the emergency exit door button and left the bus with the stunned girl. He touched her rear end while they walked off into the darkness. His targets gone, he was alone. The night carried on with the radiant glow of yellow light. Ray could do nothing now.

Ray was angry… There was no one on his bus… He could not satisfy his need!!!

He had to…

There was only one thing left to do…

It never failed.

He turned off all the lights on his bus, changed the blinds to show *Sorry, Out of Service* and began to prowl around the streets of London, looking for people to kill and rape. He had a few hours before the garage reported the bus missing.

No one expects an *out of service* bus to be dangerous. People want to get home, so they would use any bus going their way.

Ray liked this level of trust and devised a new plan. He was dressed for the occasion, he had the innocent vehicle and he had the protection from the police. No officer of the law would bother an *Out of Service* bus…

Ray had all night and he smiled as he approached a young woman who wanted to get home. She extended her hand and did not even look. He pulled over, opened the door and smiled!

The clown smile! That deadly smile that no one recognizes.

"Hello miss." *You're mine…*

SPRAY ON CLOWN

Neil Leckman

It was close to Halloween and Jess needed a costume quick, it wasn't important what it was, just something for tonight's party. Every place he'd been so far had sold out, except for the toddler costumes. He didn't think going as a tiny "My Little Pony" or Ironman would cut the mustard. So he drove to one last Halloween shop on the very edge of town, in hopes the location kept them from being sold out. When he pulled into the poorly lit parking lot they were just getting ready to lock the front door. He jumped out of his car, ran over and coaxed them into letting him in if he made it quick. He ran to the costume aisle and found it was empty like every other place, except for a box of cans marked "Spray on Clown" with a blurry photo of a clown on the crooked label. He grabbed two cans, hurried to the register and handed them to the clerk. The clerk ran it over the scanner several times but nothing registered.

"Do you remember what the price was?" he asked Jess.

In a hurry to get out of there, Jess replied, "Yeah, I think it was $5.00, clearance price."

"Well, that would explain why it doesn't ring up. I'll just do an override." Saying that the clerk rang it up and put the cans into a plastic bag. Jess paid, grabbed the bag and ran out to his car. If he hurried he would still have time to get to the party before things got going real good. He wanted to see if Mary was there and ask her out on a date. He hoped she was wearing the witch costume he'd seen her buying at the store a week ago. If she she'd look wicked hot. He sped to his apartment to get ready for the party which would start in an hour. He set the bag down and got into the shower, figuring he had just enough time to clean up and get rid of his funk before he went to the party.

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Back at the Halloween store the clerk turned to another employee and asked him, "Do you remember ever getting something called "Spray on Clown" and stocking it?"
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The other employee was sweeping a pile of dirt into a dust pan. He looked up. “Never heard of it before, why?”

“Guy just bought some, he said it was on clearance, but I looked and can’t find anything like that on the shelves”

“Wow, bonus, dude!”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He took the extra ten, pocketed it and rang it up as an error override. Hell, he’d buy a couple of brews on the way home with the cash, nobody else would know about it.

The other employee took the full dust pan and emptied it into the large garbage can, on top of the box labeled “Spray on Clown”. He smiled at the clerk who had pocketed the money and for a moment his eyes glowed yellow…

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Jess jumped out of the shower and dried off, then combed his hair and brushed his teeth before using the spray on stuff to make his costume. He found some old ragged pants and a torn T-shirt to add to the effect of a poor clown. He envisioned himself looking something like Charlie Chaplin when he was finished, or close. Looking at himself in the mirror, he reached over for the can of spray and popped the top off. There was a spray nozzle that you had to twist and line up with two arrows to make sure it sprayed where you wanted it. He rotated the can, looking for some instructions but all he found was the blurry image of a clown and small lettering that said “spray and wait fifteen minutes”. Well, hell, it seemed to be pretty simple. Holding the can a few inches from his face, he sprayed with his eyes closed. He could feel something cool on his skin as he did it, but when he opened his eyes there didn’t seem to be anything coming out of the can.

He walk into the living room and turned on the television, prepared to wait fifteen minutes for the effects. The first noticeable thing was a tingling sensation everywhere he had sprayed. Soon that increased to a feeling like things crawling all over his head. It became so much of a distraction that he decided to go to the bathroom and look in the mirror to see what was actually happening to him.

As he was going there, he noticed some clumsiness in his steps. He looked down and saw he was wearing shoes that were ten sizes too big. He couldn’t understand how that happened when he had only sprayed his head.
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Shrugging, he figured it was a bonus. In the bathroom he looked in the mirror and gasped. His hair had taken on rainbow hues in streaks. His eyebrows had grown very bushy. As he watched, blood vessels appeared to rupture and swell until his nose was round and bright red. His skin blanched and became white. His lips swelled to three times their normal size and became bright red. He looked as if he had spent hours putting on clown makeup. He reached up and gently squeezed his nose. It felt like foam rubber, but he knew it was engorged with his blood and that creeped him out a bit. He looked just like a circus clown should and that is what he wanted so he walked through his apartment and out the front door.

As he was walking to his car, he heard a strange horn behind him. He looked round and saw a tiny clown car following him. He felt a strange compulsion to climb inside but resisted the urge. The car sat there idling; he couldn't see inside because the windows were tinted. The horn sounded again, it sounded more urgent than before, if a horn could sound urgent. A sunroof opened and a giant balloon squeezed out. Attached to the balloon was a large sign that read "GET IN!!" One of the back doors opened up and Jess walked over and looked inside. What he saw was impossible, rows of clowns that looked just like him, sitting staring straight ahead. Then as one they all turned and spoke, "Get in!!" Their eyes glowed red for a moment, then they grinned with swollen red lips.

Jess couldn't fight the compulsion to climb in. As soon as he sat down he felt his soul stripped from him, leaving an empty husk that looked like a clown.

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On the sidewalk in front of his apartment the man from the Halloween store smiled as the tiny car drove into the distance. Soon he would have enough souls to celebrate Halloween in the proper way. For many people that would be the last thing they would ever know. He walked up the stairs, let himself into the apartment and picked up the two cans of 'Spray on Clown". As he was leaving he saw an invitation lying on the kitchen counter.

"The city's biggest Halloween party. Come and celebrate Halloween the way it was meant to be!"

Smiling he picked up the invitation. Now he knew where his next stop would be. It was time to show the world what real clowns were made
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of...

CLOWNING AROUND

David Frazier

Clown white covered his face
Wild red stiffened hair
A painted smile
Red rubber nose
Festive polka dot suit
Big floppy shoes

Shiny butcher knife
Glowing in the moonlight
Plunged deep into hearts
Of unsuspecting victims

Gorey laughter after the deed
Couldn't stop, so he carried on
Serial killer, on and on
Piling up, like so much wood

Sweetened them with lime
Buried them not too deep
In the crawl, just out of reach
Just to keep the stink down

Can't you see who I be?
Normalcy is not in me.

John Wayne Gacy.

THE CLOWN PARADE

Patricia Anabel

My name is Billy Bob the Clown and this is my account of recent events, as I believe them to have happened.

Our town, Jollyburg, has always been known as a site of fun and entertainment. It is nicknamed Little Vegas and we have our share of casinos, theatres, clubs and all sorts of shows. There is even a Luna Park on the outskirts, including the permanent circus.

Obviously the entertainment is good business and our Mayor has never relented inviting famous performers to do their stint here. It was he who started a tradition of The Clown Parade, which happened every year in May for the past decade. Over the years it has become a major event to visit and to take a part in. Clowns from all over the world would come and perform their tricks and with the 10th Anniversary this year, it was going to be the biggest Clown Parade yet.

The Mayor was definitely determined to have the day go without a glitch, getting personally involved. He usually would oversee all invitations and preparations, making sure that everything was as it should be, but I was still surprised to see him in my caravan. Apparently he wanted to invite all local clowns in person as a thank you for their service to fun, while making sure that we would attend the drinks party after the event. I was somewhat flattered. I had spoken to the Mayor only once or twice before on random occasions and was unsure if he even liked clowns. He always came across as rather disinterested, to say the least. However, to be personally invited, that was something.

The parade route was another change to the usual pattern. It was made slightly longer, winding through streets and ending in a big warehouse on a hill above the town. There the celebrations would continue with drinks and buffet for clowns while a firework show went on down by the river.

It all sounded quite exciting and I was looking forward to seeing all my friends again, especially Gerald and Geraldine. The sibling clown act, Gerald Green and Geraldine Pink, have made their name with their Colourful Cacophony, random mix of random sounds and colours, which seemed to strike a chord with little children. They usually arrived a few

days earlier and stayed in my house; we always had a laugh, playing pranks on each other.

Being such a big event this year, all the local clowns agreed to working together in one performance. It involved a transparent glass bath full of green goo being transported on a back of a long lorry. Unfortunately, a few days before the parade I became ill with flu. I felt weak and was aching all over. It was heart-breaking for me, however, not wanting to miss out on the event completely, I decided to tag along while making balloon animals and flowers for bystanders.

Finally the day arrived and three of us met at breakfast. Geraldine looked beautiful in her pink and purple gown, going as Pink of Hearts. Feeling inspired, I made her a purple and pink balloon crown and scepter. She curtsied with a smile as I crowned her. She and Gerald decided to go to the meeting point at Town Hall early and meet the others. I was still feeling under the weather, so I wanted to stay in and have a rest, so we agreed to meet just before the parade started. After they left, I took a couple of aspirins and went back to bed. I made sure that my alarm was set, closed my eyes and drifted off..

I woke up with a bad feeling that something was amiss. My alarm clock on the bedside table suggested it was 9am. I could hear a series of explosive noises. Fireworks! A second look at the clock told me that it had stopped just one minute before the alarm went off I felt a wave of enormous disappointment flooding my heart that I missed the parade. Sudden noise made me jump. It took me a couple of seconds before it dawned on me that it was my phone.

Gerald! They must be wondering what has happened to me.

“Nice of you to call me now, old chap, after the p...”

“Billy Bob, help!” His urgent moan interrupted me mid-sentence.

“Gerald? What's wrong?”

“The Mayor... hates clowns... drinks... something wrong... feels wrong!' The staccato sentences did not make any sense. What was he trying to say?

“Gerald, slow down! What’s wrong? Mayor what?” My voice was carrying notes of panic and strain. Gerald's breathing on the other end was becoming erratic.

“He put something in drinks!” Gerald's scream contained pure pain. “Mayor hates...” The phone went dead.

I stood there for long few minutes, just staring at the receiver in my hand, trying to comprehend what I'd just heard. Was it a joke? My friend's voice had been filled with agony, fear and suffering. Yes, Gerald was a known prankster, but not even he would make up something like that. I threw on some clothes and drove to the warehouse to see for myself.

The drive took me nearly an hour and it was getting late when I arrived. The building looked empty and dark, there were no cars parked in the front. Under the cape of darkness I walked carefully around the building. There was a lorry parked by the back exit; two men in dark clothes were bringing out boxes and loading them at the back.

"What will the Mayor do with all these creepy dolls?" A low whisper broke the silence.

"I've no idea. We're supposed to collect them and deliver to his mate George." The other voice sounded deep and disengaged.

"George? At the rendering plant? What he will do with this lot?"

"Yeah, that's him. And you're asking too many questions, just zip it and get on with it!"

Finally the last box was loaded and men drove off.

I slowly approached the building, noticing a little doll on the ground. It must have slipped off one of the boxes. It was lying face down, blond curls all tangled and wearing a pink princess outfit, not dissimilar to that one of Pink of Hearts. I picked the doll up and turned it in my hands, brushing hair away from its face. My heart stopped, my stomach churned and the world started spinning at a violent speed.

I was staring into Geraldine's face.

THE SHUFFLING OF THE CARDS

Ken L. Jones

Now everyone thinks that The Mocker, the world's most evil fictional clown, was created by Adam Abel who created the world famous fictional masked detective, The Wulf. But The Mocker was much older than The Wulf and was born in, of all places, a gypsy fortune teller's traveling caravan wagon. His father was none other than a boy who was only twelve years old at the time. The boy in question was named Lazlo Valkivisous and his mother had a different last name but was commonly known as "The All Seeing Esmeralda". Nobody knew who the lad's true father was but there were unsettling whispers about his identity around the gypsies' cooking fires late at night.

Lazlo had very little formal schooling and cared for little other than drawing. All day long whenever he wasn't doing the chores that were expected of him by the others of his tribe or he wasn't sleeping or eating, he had some kind of art utensil in his hand with which he spent the long hours of each day covering any scrap of paper he could find with both caricature portraits and the denizens of the Sunday and daily newspaper funny pages which were both his delight and his passion. Early on everyone began to take notice of the skill with which he was doing all this and he earned extra money drawing different people's portraits and caricatures as they visited the gypsy camp to see their bear dance or else to frolic with the gypsy women, most of whose favors were for sale for the small price of a few dollars combined with a pocket or two that got picked with impunity in the bargain.

Lazlo was proud of the fact that his mother was so good at reading other people's futures that she didn't have to take care of their more pressing present needs while flat on her back. To show his gratitude for this fact he created for her birthday one year a special kind of hand rendered tarot card deck for her to divine with. He had long drawn an original character he called The Mocker, an evil devilish clown who was both funny and deadly at the same time. People seemed to delight in this character whenever they came across him. Lazlo's mother, in particular, adored this grinning figure of mischief and terror and so he created a hand drawn deck of cards featuring him showing fifty-two different human emotions by

which she might use her second sight to tell her more than interested patrons all that tomorrow and the day after that were going to hold for them.

One day in the Catskill Mountains, not too far from New York City itself, the gypsies had camped for the night, preparing themselves for their upcoming visits to the sections of the Big Apple itself where their type was tolerated if not totally welcomed. It was around dusk when a young male hunter chanced to come across them. He was tall and handsome in a cocky way and was obviously a pure blooded Jew but he introduced himself as one Adam Abel. To get on the right side of the ever suspicious gypsies he offered them the bounty of rabbits and squirrels he had gathered that day through his shooting skills, for their giant cauldron like stew pots that night. They were so pleased by this that they offered to have him join them for dinner and then to enjoy their songs and dances after that. When that was over he was just about to inquire about bedding down one of their for sale wenches when he noticed in the farthest corner of the camp Lazlo's mother's gaudy gypsy wagon and the young boy in front of it, sketching by campfire light while seated on an upturned wooden pail as he smiled strangely to himself as if bewitched Abel found himself drawn to this interesting tableau and for a time he stared with a dumbfounded grin as the young boy sketched his Mocker character on an old brown grocery sack with a piece of burnt fireplace charcoal.

Before Adam could engage the lad in any banter, the door to the caravan swung open as if of its own accord and he saw within its murky candle dancing depths the beautiful Esmeralda hunched over a huge crystal ball, gesturing for him to enter and take a seat. As if a puppet on a string he did so and after laying a five dollar bill on the table, she went rigid and then began to prognosticate for him while she shuffled and fingered her deck of homemade predicting cards as she did so. Adam was taken aback that she seemed to know who he was and everything else about him too for he was not yet a household name. First she established her credentials and affinities with those who no longer walk in the flesh by telling him all about himself in the tiniest detail then, when asked stammeringly by him, she told him that he was going to help create something new soon. Never before published comic strips in magazine form at a very cheap price and she predicted that he would know great success with his new crime fighting character who dressed up as an animal in order to strike terror into the

hearts of the kind of criminals who had assassinated his creation's millionaire parents when he was still but a lad.

"He will last for years," she moaned, "like Mickey Mouse, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan. He will be known all across the Earth. Never give up complete ownership of him like some will of their own similar characters or you will regret it until your dying day. You must have help in all of this for it's too much for any one man to create. My son Lazlo will assist you, it is your destiny and his. Always treat him well and acknowledge his part in all of this then you will be very prosperous and well-thought of by all men. If you do not do this, even if I must return from the very pits of Hell to do so I will see that you're punished for not doing as I have requested of you. Now swear to me that you will do this thing, Adam Abel."

Adam was too shocked to do much else and then when he had agreed to that he went and waited outside and nervously puffed on a cigarette while Esmeralda packed a carpetbag that contained all of her son's worldly possessions. Then as he left the gypsy life behind him forever the woman bent down and kissed her son on the forehead and pressed into his hand the deck of homemade cards that would always act as both his talisman and a souvenir of the unlikely soil from which he had sprung.

Downtown New York City was a revelation to young Lazlo. Never before in all of his gypsy wanderings had he ever encountered anything that compared to it. Adam Abel was more than a little amused by the boy's wide-eyed wonder at all the sights and sounds that he had long taken for granted. Adam, long a bachelor, had a modest one bedroom rental where he ensconced the boy and at first they took turns sleeping in shifts in the single bed. Adam was more than taken with Lazlo's drawing abilities once he had a chance to test the parameters of them in depth. The kid was already good and with a little encouragement and a lot of practice that could be had while on the job he was sure that he would develop into a major cartooning talent.

Abel was beside himself with excitement and dread at the prospect of his meeting the following week with a publisher who was going to put out an original line of comic books. He had already known some success in reprinting comic strips in this new format and was anxious to be the first to put out books with original material. Since he had already had great success in doing just that with two young teenagers' character Skyrman he was hoping to duplicate that with another feature in a similar vein.

Abel had long been playing around with a costumed character called The Wulf who was meant to be a collage of all the great heroes and crime fighters of world history. Sherlock Holmes was in there as was Zorro. There was more than a little of the fabulous pulp magazine character The Shadow and a lot more similar characters besides that and yet despite the fact that he was derived from all these sources, from the first the character had something that was uniquely his own going on, too. It was as if he was familiar and yet brand new at the same time and then there was the great costume he wore that made him look like some alpha male leader of the pack wolf in human form. Abel was especially excited about this upcoming meeting after his recent encounter with Lazlo's mother Esmeralda. He could not help but have her predictions about his success at this project ringing in his head as he came into the doors of American Magazine Publications where he was to meet with the head man and pitch his new character to him. Abel had done some minor work here already but he had never before met the man who owned and ran the place. His first impression of the cigar chomping middle-aged and heavy set Jasper Doonanstein was that he was just another owner/manager of a sweat shop. Lord knows that Abel knew far too many of those types from his hard scrabble youth in New York's vast Jewish ghetto but even at that there was something about this man that he didn't like and didn't trust.

"What have you got for me today, kid?" the older man said impatiently. "Come on show! I haven't got all day here."

Abel, who was dressed in the one and only good suit he owned and more than a little resembled famous movie star gangster George Raft in it, tried to be nonchalant as he undid the string that held his giant portfolio closed. With well manicured fingers he removed a large Bristol board drawing that lay on the top and held it up for the publisher to inspect.

"Mr. Doonanstein, please allow me to introduce The Wulf, the greatest masked crime fighter of all time."

Doonanstein's reaction was unexpected. All he did was whistle in an appreciative way and gesture for Abel to sit down in the chair across from his desk. An hour later the deal was done and Abel, remembering a very specific point that Lazlo's mother had told him, had insisted that he did not want to sell the character outright to the man as Sesmer and Shulkin had so foolishly done a few months back with Skyman. Abel and his new boss had settled on a seventy-thirty split with Abel taking the smaller part on

everything to do with the character for all time and Abel felt good about getting such an unprecedented deal out of this man who was notorious for doing for whatever he wanted to naïve young cartoonists.

He stopped off at his favorite Jewish delicatessen on the way back to his one bedroom apartment and picked up a goodly feast of his favorite food. He brought it back for him and Lazlo to dine upon. When he opened the door he found the boy drawing away in a large sketch book that he had given him to practice in. The boy's nostrils twitched with hunger and anticipation at the delicious kosher food that wafted out of the paper sack in Adam's hand. Not having eaten much in the last twenty-four hours he seemed more interested in that than hearing the details from the business meeting that Abel had just came back from. Abel spread the food on the small kitchen table in the room and grinned as he sat down to it.

"Dig in, kid. The meeting went better than I had any reason to expect it should. Your mom was sure right about that. I don't think either one of us is ever going to be hungry again and if we are going to be knocking out these funny books we are going to have to find a couple of more people to help us get it done. Oh yeah, you need a different name than Lazlo, something more American sounding. Did I ever tell you that Adam Abel is not my real name? How about Harry Masterson?"

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The next four years went by in a blur. All together it took five artists and one writer to produce an average issue of The Wulf. As an artist Abel really wasn't very good or very fast but as a creator of characters and an overseer and shaper of other artist's work on his characters he was without peer. At first they hired a white haired old man who had long been a pulp magazine illustrator to do most of the art chores and Abel recruited an eccentric hard drinking friend of his Bart Finnegan to knock out scripts for the series which Abel would heavily alter and work over before they drew them. The newly christened Harry Masterson was office boy, gofer, art assistant and general man Friday and he was pretty nice about doing so and got along well with the others. He especially took great joy in helping the old man draw the book itself. Harry improved artistically by leaps and bounds under the old man's watchful and helpful tutelage and soon was drawing whole
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pages of the magazine itself and eventually drawing short backup features in it

It was about this time that Doonanstein started bitching about the book to Abel. The main source of his irritation was that the villains that The Wulf fought weren't memorable or worthy of him. Wanting to keep the cash flowing in on this newfound success, the publisher suggested that Adam come up with a great villain for The Wulf to fight. Adam went back to the cramped studio where The Wulf was produced and explained his dilemma. He started free associating ideas for the villain as he walked in circles in the middle of the office and chained smoked cigarette after cigarette but every one of them reeked. Finally looking around the room, he noticed Harry was in a corner at a small kitchen table playing solitaire with the homemade deck of cards that his mother had once used to predict the future. Looking over his shoulder, Abel's eyes bulged out when he saw Harry's original character, The Mocker, there. Seizing one of them in his hand he began dancing around the room and showing it to everybody there while he yelled Eureka over and over again. Harry, who hadn't been paying much attention to any of this, asked him what he was getting at.

"This is it, kid. The Wulf finally has an arch nemesis that is worth his time and effort. I think when we show him battling The Mocker in our comic books it's going to set the world on fire. Is that okay with you pal?"

Harry just nodded, "Sure, boss, as long as anyone who asks understands that I thought him up."

As if not listening Abel just kept talking away. "Sure, kid, whatever you say. Now let's get busy on this story this one is going to be huge!" and sure enough Abel was right.

Harry Masterson's The Mocker was just what The Wulf's comic and its spinoffs needed to become a long lasting worldwide success and through it all Harry Masterson, who had now graduated to producing whole issues of The Wulf all by himself, remained too busy and too oblivious to realize exactly how short changed he was getting for all of his vast herculean efforts. As all of this caught on and started expanding everybody but Adam Abel at the studio was disturbed by how all the publicity surrounding it seemed to focus in on Abel and Abel alone. The worst part of the whole thing was that all this disinformation made it seem as if Abel produced all the books all by himself and always had.

As so often happens Abel, riding a wave of money and success, became more and more arrogant and more and more of a stern boss with the rest of the studio who deeply resented this new turn of events. Harry in particular began to dislike the new creature that his former friend and mentor had become and the final straw came when a reporter from The New York Times came to interview Adam. The newsman was particularly taken with The Mocker and was going to slant the April Fool's orientated story he was creating about The Wulf around this practical joking clown of a villain. Sometime during the interview the reporter made a reference to when Adam had first personally thought up The Mocker and, while Harry did a slow burn with lips trembling and tears rolling down his cheeks as he sat in the dark corner, he heard Abel boastingly taking full credit for everything about The Wulf, especially The Mocker. Harry was too numb to do much about it and tried to just ignore it but this was the final straw for him.

It was on a busy morning soon after that that Adam burst into the room, foaming at the mouth with excitement. "You guys aren't going to believe this! I just came from AM Comics and they told me down there that the Flaxner Brother's themselves are going to make a first class series of The Wulf cartoons similar to the ones that they make about Shoreleave, The Salty Sailor and Regina Razzamataz. Can you imagine? The only animation better than that gets done at Disney and gets this the very first cartoon is going to be my The Wulf versus The Mocker."

As he announced this Harry rose up from his drawing table and started staring daggers at Adam. "I don't suppose I have any reason to expect that my name might be on there any place? You know since I created The Mocker years before The Wulf was even a gleam in your eye."

Adam, surprised at this turn of events, started to try and sweet talk the boy and calm him down. "Sorry, kid, you know it doesn't work that way. Only my name will be on it. Not my rules, you know."

"Yeah, well tell that to Sesmer and Shulkin, there's two names there at least."

Something about how vehemently Harry said this rubbed Adam the wrong way. "Listen, punk, I've been damned good to you like the older brother you never had. I took you out of that gypsy hell hole you were living in and I helped you get a normal life together and on top of all that I pay you rather well for assisting me, I might add."

“Assisting you? I do most of the goddamned work on this book and if you don’t think , why don’t you try producing it by yourself?

Hearing this truthful statement was like pouring salt on an open wound for Adam Abel and he snapped and challenged the much younger and smaller Harry to a fist fight right there. Harry tried hard to make a good showing but Abel was much more of a he-man than he was and had had a hard life on the streets before becoming a famous creator of comic books so he easily beat the living tar out of his former friend. Then, grabbing the boy by his suspenders and the seat of his pants, he threw him and all of his possessions out into the streets, including the ever present deck of Mocker cards and told him never to darken his door again for any reason.

Clearing his head, the badly beaten and bruised Harry gathered up his meager belongings and headed for the YMCA where he took a room. It was there while on a particularly stormy Winter’s night while at his lowest ebb that Harry sat on the single bed in the small cell like room. He was burning with bitterness at all that he had experienced with Adam Abel and was especially hurt at the idea that The Mocker, who was his favorite comic book character of all time that he had ever created, would never again be his. While he was thinking about all this he was compulsively shuffling and playing solitaire on the bed with the homemade deck of prophetic Mocker cards that he had once hand drawn for his mother’s use in what seemed like some other life now. As he cut the cards, one jagged edge of one of them sliced into one of his fingers and the paper cut caused some of his blood to smear in splotches across the whole deck. Cussing and talking to himself out loud about all that had happened to him, he cursed Adam Abel, The Wulf and especially anything to do with The Mocker and as he did so the lights in the whole city block blew out and something very much like an earthquake shot through the whole of the building. All of this of course was too much for Harry and he carefully put the cards back in his carpetbag, rolled over against the wall and cried himself to sleep.

The next few weeks consisted of him freelancing at various lesser comic book companies, most of whom didn’t believe him when he told them of his connection with Adam Abel and how he had created The Mocker there. Tiring of the backstabbing and bad business practices of comic books, Harry decided to go fulltime into daily newspaper strip work and his excellent artwork and ability to get it done fast soon landed him good work there even if he never became a household name by doing so.

Meanwhile The Wulf and everything associated with it went on and on and it seemed as if it would never truly go away; yet there were whispers about some kind of curse that was involved with the whole project especially if anyone tried to adapt it into anything else outside of the pages of the comic books themselves. The Flaxner Brothers' attempt to turn it into a series of cartoons became their first failure as a company. Not one useable second of animation was ever produced and in desperation they rushed out a series based on Skyman instead. This costly misstep resulted in another company taking them over and ultimately driving them out of business after they had done so.

A year later The Wulf was adapted was into a Starspangled Pictures serial movie. There were an unprecedented number of deaths on the set and most of the stunt men refused to work on it and walked out in the middle of it never to return. Worse than that, a scandal erupted after the first two chapters had come out in the theaters when it was revealed that the actors playing The Wulf and his youthful assistant Kubby were a real life pair of male homosexuals who lived together.

Next up ,a couple of decades later, was an attempt to turn The Wulf into a weekly TV series. Andy Warhol and Pop Art were all the rage at the time and so the whole series reflected that type of an approach and as a further inducement the show was packed with guest star villains who were famous Hollywood stars. This light hearted and camp approach caught on at first and everything was going fine until a famous Latin movie idol from the thirties was chosen to play The Mocker and while doing so brutally slayed his wife and children which resulted in him not only dying in the gas chamber in the State of California but in the entire show being yanked unceremoniously off the air because of it.

More time passed after that and the innate allure of The Wulf resulted in a major Hollywood studio wanting to make a big budget version of it for the silver screen. This came about mainly at the insistence of a former comic book artist turned director who had had a lifelong obsession with this character and thanks to several off the wall big budget successes that his talents had brought forth recently was given full speed ahead for what a lot of people considered to be a very iffy project at best. A maverick actor who was something of a hell raiser in his private life was chosen to play The Mocker. It caught on very hard with the public and it looked like there would be a sequel featuring The Mocker again and there would have been

except for the fact that the actor was caught in a very compromising position with an extremely underage girl in his hot tub by the LAPD and fled America, never to return while out on bail for this offense and finished his days in exile in a remote chalet in Switzerland.

Several more sequels of The Wulf were attempted with other actors playing other villains eventually helmed by other directors but none of them caught on very well and none of them featured The Mocker.

Another decade passed and another hot shot director wanted to follow the grand Hollywood tradition of remaking movies and so was allowed to take The Wulf on and do what he wanted with it. The very first movie in his projected trilogy was a massive success which some said was due to the fact that it did not feature The Mocker.

Then that redoubtable clown reared his head in the second installment and everyone was very impressed by a young, well-liked and gentle actor who played him with such psychopathic intensity. All through the shoot most involved with it felt like there was something horribly wrong with what they were doing, especially the actor playing The Mocker. Always prior to this a clean cut health food enthusiast he became, through the process of channeling this vicious and strange character, a kind of a Mr. Hyde instead of a Dr. Jekyll. Unable to sleep through the strain of it al,l shooting was shut down on the picture for a few weeks while the young actor went off and attempted to fight the nightmares and lack of sleep he was suffering with the aid of doctor prescribed medications.

A week later his girlfriend, who was herself a famous actress, let herself into the expensive suite of rooms he had in New York's most expensive hotel and was shocked to find him dead of an overdose on the floor while clad in his full costume and makeup as The Mocker. At this point, since the movie wasn't finished, it was almost scrapped but thanks to computer trickery and the use of doubles it came out to great acclaim and the sweet gentle lad who was the focus of all this won posthumous great acclaim for his performance.

Propelled by all this, a third movie was made that did not involve The Mocker and all went smoothly with it until the night of its opening when an obsessed fan dressed up as the hateful clown blew up a whole theater full of people who were watching the opening night showing.

It was at this point that people really began to notice a pattern about all this and as urban myths will, connections were made even where there

wasn't much reason to do so and so the curse of The Mocker became a topic around water coolers and on the World Wide Web.

It was because of this that Harry was invited to be a special guest of the world famous San Diego Comic Con where he was to be on one of the panel discussions there about just that topic. He hadn't been to one of these affairs in a long time and things had changed so much that he scarcely recognized the event anymore. It used to be so much fun; a giant group of people getting drunk, getting high on drugs and just partying with the fans who loved comic books back then. All that informality was gone now and had been replaced by something that more than a little resembled the Sundance Film Festival or something of that ilk. Hardly any of it was about comic books themselves anymore and everything was formal and tense and well orchestrated and the stars of motion pictures and television that were there both dwarfed and over-shadowed the humble cartoonists who gave them such bankable characters to portray in the cinema and on the tube.

Harry felt lost and alone as he stood up on the second level of the building where it was being held and as he looked down into the withering masses below him he was reminded of a giant snake pit he had once encountered while on a vacation out in the desert. The real reason that he had come here was because he was actually not in very good health. His years of abusing his body while he got his newspaper strip work done and the endless chain smoking that he indulged in while he did so had destroyed his lungs and he now routinely brought up blood every time he coughed, which was often. He had originally agreed to all this because he saw it as some kind of swan song and he had hoped to say goodbye to not only some of the fans who recognized his true part in all this but also to some of the other pros who had been such good boon companions in earlier headier days. The one thing he hadn't expected was to run into Adam Abel whom he hadn't seen in years. The only reason he had known as much happiness as he had in recent decades was that he devoutly ignored anything about the man who was now so successful and well-to-do much of which was at Harry's own personal expense.

Seeing Adam enter the hallway surrounded by his young and beautiful and peroxided wife and an entourage of yes-men clingers-on and security guard types sent Harry into a rage such as he had never known. Seconds later he could hardly catch his breath and was coughing up blood once again. Because of that he reached into an air flight bag that he carried

with him trying to retrieve a large handkerchief that he kept for just such emergencies. While doing so he dislodged The Mocker cards that he had made for his mother so long ago and which he had always kept nearby or on his person as his own personal good luck piece. He lifted the cards in his trembling hands and saw that they were covered now in his own hacked up blood and brown tinged phlegm.

As he looked at them through unfocused eyes, all the years of humiliation and angst that Adam Abel's business treachery towards him had caused him came flooding back like a tidal wave in some sewer pipe and this feeling of hatred and envy and a throbbing need for revenge grew even larger and more out of control as he fought to focus his eyes on the scene below. There was something that stabbed him in the heart worse than the sharpest knife possibly could. Harry gazed down on Abel as he posed with dozens of convention goers dressed in homemade Mocker outfits while Adam grinned manically as he gestured at the faux clown alley that now surrounded him and guffawed over and over again, "My creation, my children, my genius."

This was too much for Harry Masterson and in that instant all the contrived nonsense about him being a normal American male melted away and once again he was Lazlo Valkivisous, a true one hundred percent gypsy prince who was now channeling the spirit of his long dead mother. Clearing his throat of all the death and disease that was pipelining its way up from his rotting insides, he smeared all of this all over his deck of cards, then he flung them with all of his might out over the vast convention center, shrieking at the top of his lungs in a language he hadn't spoken in many years. The room filled up with some kind of reeking billowing smoke that made everyone cough as if they had just been tear gassed and when all of this had cleared away sufficiently, people began to scream in terror when they saw what was now revealed to their unbelieving eyes, for there to the last person, were people who now and for all time had exact duplicates of The Mocker's clown-like face in place of the visages they had had only seconds before. Nobody laughed louder about it than The Mocker's true creator as he sank to his knees and died, content that he at last had been awarded his own personal and most appropriate pound of flesh. He was still chuckling much in the manner of his famous creation when he at last arrived in the darkest pits of Hell.

A SCARECROW WITH A CLOWN MASK

Jordan Elizabeth Mierek

In all of her thirteen years – and Hollace knew that didn't count for much, but it was all she had – she'd never seen a disembodied face left to rot in the woods before. True, it wasn't quite the woods, more like the field, what with being left near one of the dirt paths that crisscrossed the family farm.

"Daddy," Hollace yelled again. She poked at the face with its hollow eyes and bloodied lips, using a stick she'd found near a fern. "We gotta call the police!" It would be like one of those police shows her mother watched at night when she sipped her wine and played with her tablet.

Autumn leaves crunched under his work boots as he jogged down the path to her, grabbing her shoulders to pull her away from the face that gave her skin the crawls.

"Holly, for real." He laughed, tugging her against his front. "That's a mask, sweetie. It's a clown mask, like for Halloween."

"No it isn't…" Her voice trailed off and her cheeks flushed despite the bitter wind. Her father flipped the "face" over with his foot to show the plastic back. With the dirt on it, she hadn't realized it was fake. "How'd it get out here?"

"Some kids were probably playing in the woods."

"But it's our woods." She peered at the darkness between the trees.

"And this is a hobby farm, sweetie. We're an orchard. People come here for our goods. They probably thought it would be fun to have an early Halloween." He narrowed his eyes, though, so she knew he didn't like it anymore than she did.

"How do we give the mask back?" They couldn't keep it if it belonged to someone else.

"You know what it would be perfect for?" He picked it up and slapped it against his jean-clad thigh. "Let's make us a scarecrow. This'll be a great face, won't it?"

They'd never made a scarecrow before, but maybe theirs would sing and dance like the one on the *Wizard of Oz*. Hollace laughed; it would never happen, but how fun to imagine all that.

They spent the rest of the afternoon setting up a body with dowels from the shed and old clothes from the rag bin. Hollace tied the mask over a

feed sack stuffed with dried cornhusks and her father shoved the whole contraption into the dirt at the edge of the cornfield, facing the road, near the driveway.

"Daddy, should we name him?"

"Naw. He's just a scarecrow. He don't need a name."

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The next time her older brother took the weekday afternoon hayride, Hollace hopped onto the buckboard beside him.

"I thought you hated this ride." Casey adjusted his leather gloves before taking the reins. Families shifted around the hay bales in the back to get comfortable, a jumble of voices and laughter. When she was younger, she hadn't understood why so many strangers came to the farm, but as she'd grown older, she'd realized that was how her parents made their money. City folk, as her father called them, loved to visit a farm where all they had to do was enjoy themselves.

"I wanna see my clown scarecrow." She tapped her boots against the side to knock off some of the mud.

When the two old mares pulled the wagon along the path that skirted the farm, she almost stood up before she remembered how Casey would freak out over that. He didn't even want her on the special late-night run where some of his friends from school dressed in costumes to jump out from the trees and scare the guests.

"That's mine!" Hollace pointed to the scarecrow, the plaid shirt ruffling in the breeze that tugged on her two blonde braids.

"Then how come he's out here?" asked a little boy who sat behind her.

She turned her head to see him, with his Yankees baseball cap and bright orange jacket. "That's where I want him to be, so everyone can see him."

"Cool." The boy widened his green eyes.

It had to be the wind, but the scarecrow seemed to wave at her, so she waved back, grinning.

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“He’s gone,” the woman wailed. “I can’t find my son anywhere. He was wearing a bright orange jacket I got him for his birthday. You can’t miss him.”

The police were phoned and Hollace’s parents made her stay in the house with her sister, but they both watched from the windows. The guests evacuated the orchard and the police combed each nook and cranny; they checked the house, too.

“Did you see anything?” asked the cop with the thick mustache. He held a pencil against a pad of paper, so Hollace wondered if she was actually a detective.

“No, sir,” she said, adding the title to be polite. “I mean, I saw him on the hayride, but that was it. He called my scarecrow cool.”

The police officers found a scrap of orange cloth in the cornfield and then a sneaker the mother claimed belonged to her son. They decided he’d been stolen, probably by his estranged father, and put out a missing child alert. The orchard was deemed safe and even the mother agreed Hollace’s family hadn’t done anything wrong.

“He’ll be fine,” her mother promised. “Some people just have to watch their kids better. We’ll put up posters here. Hopefully, they’ll find him soon.”

Hollace hung one of the posters on the scarecrow’s post, since he did face the road.

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The Field Trip, as Hollace called it, happened to be her favorite part of autumn, because it meant her class got to visit the farm. Her mother had gone to school with the principal of the elementary school, so the Field Trip happened for Hollace and her siblings. It would be her last year, since seventh grade meant she’d be at the junior high, so no more trips. Sometimes the entire grade went; this year, it would just be Hollace’s class. They took the mini-bus for the half-hour ride to the farm from the school and Mrs. French made her sit in the front to talk.

“Grandpa Bliss started Bliss Orchard back in 1940.” Something around then.

“Is he still alive?” Mrs. French asked.
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“He died about five years ago. He used to live in the trailer out by the apple trees.” It would’ve been more fun to sit in the back with her friends making bracelets out of rubber bands, but it was Mrs. French’s first year teaching and she never stopped asking questions Hollace’s mother thought that was nice. *You can both learn together.*

“Are you only open in the fall?”

“No, we’re always open. We have horseback riding and snowshoes in the winter and people come to the store for Christmas presents.” The driver steered the bus into the parking lot. “That’s my scarecrow. I found the clown mask.”

Mrs. French wrinkled her little nose. “How hideous.” Her eyes widened, as if she realized Hollace might take offense. “I mean… the crows must be terrified.”

Hollace’s father met them at the gate and this year he didn’t hug her, like last year, when one of the boys had outright snickered. Her father had been more embarrassed than she was. Everyone got to pick out a pumpkin from the patch, except for Hollace.

“I’ve already got eight,” she told Mrs. French. “They’re all up on the porch. I draw the faces and my brother carves them out. Then Casey gets to eat the seeds.”

“I wish someone would help me carve my Jack O-Lanterns.” Mrs. French laughed, but she kept her gaze on the scarecrow. “I swear those eyes follow me. It’s like one of the creepy old paintings.”

Hollace’s father led them through the barn and Casey passed out carrots and apples so they could feed the ponies and horses.

“This one is mine.” Hollace patted her brown mare and the pony butted her hand with her nose “Mrs. French, if you want…” Hollace let her voice trail off as she scanned the crowd, but her teacher had left the stable. If Mrs. French had grown up in the city of Buffalo, she might not be too familiar with livestock and Hollace’s mare was as gentle as a feather.

“Mrs. French,” Hollace called from the doorway. A family with an infant boy strode by on their way to the shop, but otherwise, the yard lay bare. Hollace checked the bathrooms behind the goat barn, in case Mrs. French got lost, but they were empty.

“Mama!” Hollace burst into the shop. “I can’t find my teacher anywhere. You think she went into the corn maze?”

Her mother checked there and they looked through the outbuildings, called her name between the rows of apple trees.

"She hasn't come back here," said the driver, but he left the bus to help them search.

"I don't understand this," Hollace's mother whispered to her father after she phoned the principal. "How can two people disappear? This place has been open to the public for thirty years. We've never lost anyone."

Hollace stood in the corner of the living room with her arms folded, a chill coursing over her arms despite her jean jacket. Mrs. French loved teaching – why would she abandon her class?

Her father called the police and when the principal arrived, he made Hollace go back to school with the class.

Her mother stood in the driveway, biting her bottom lip, as the bus pulled away.

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"Penelope, what do you think?" Hollace straightened the old-fashioned peppermint sticks in the jar beside the cash register while her sister counted the proceeds.

"I think all this happened after you put up that scarecrow. Clowns shouldn't be scarecrows."

Hollace tightened her hands into fists at her sides, but her older sister didn't look up. "That's not my scarecrow's fault."

"You know what else isn't your fault? Any of this." Penelope snorted. "I'm teasing you."

"I heard the principal saying we might have to close the farm," Hollace whispered.

Penelope raised her eyebrows. "Because a little boy gets stolen by his father and a city teacher wanders off into the woods? They found her purse out back, you know She'd probably lost."

"The police didn't find anything." Hollace glanced around the one-room shop, with the herbs hanging from the rafters and the braided rugs on the floor. Shadows danced in the corners.

"They'll keep looking. People show up in random places."

"You think there's a killer on the loose?"
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“No.” Penelope rolled her eyes as she handed Hollace the vinyl purse of money. “Go run this in to Dad before you freeze out here. You’re nose is bright red.”

“I…” Penelope might roll her eyes again if Hollace confessed to crying earlier. “Okay.” She grabbed the money and darted across the yard to the house.

When suppertime came, her mother sent her back out for Penelope. “That girl would clean the skin off her bones. Tell her to get in here. The dirt can wait for tomorrow.”

Hollace ran back across the yard and pushed open the door to the shop, with the little brass bell that jingled. “Penelope, dinner’s done.”

The two light bulbs shone from the ceiling, illuminating an empty shop. All the supplies were there, but not Penelope.

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“We’ll call the police,” Hollace mother whispered. “Someone’s doing this to us. Penelope knows not to wander off in the dark.”

“She’s seventeen,” Hollace’s father countered. “If she wants to go for a walk, she will. It was a stressful day and she probably wanted to cool down.”

Hollace rubbed her hands together. Her fingers had never felt so frozen, not even in the winter. Had whatever had taken Mrs. French and the boy gotten her sister?

“I’ll go check the back paths.” Casey yanked on his fleece coat, pushed his glasses up his nose, and grabbed a flashlight off the shelf by the front door.

When he wasn’t back in an hour, Hollace’s father called his cell phone. It rang to voice mail and he headed out.

He took his shotgun with him.

Hollace pressed her face against the kitchen window until the beam of his flashlight disappeared around the corn field.

“Hollace, get over here.” Her mother’s voice wavered.

“I’m not going out.”

“But… get away from the window.” Her mother counted bullets into a revolver and snapped it into place.

“You want me to get a shotgun too?”
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Her mother squeezed her eyes shut. “No. We’ll be fine. Everything will be fine.”

A greenish light flickered near where her father had vanished. None of them owned a flashlight that shade. “Mama, what’s that out by the corn?”

Her mother stood behind her, one hand gripping Hollace’s shoulder and the other clutching the revolver. “Is it one of them?”

The green shade flashed again. “I don’t think so. What do you think it is?”

Her mother swore under her breath. “Stay here, Hol.”

“Mama?” Her mother wouldn’t dare go off by herself. They needed to stick together. “Let’s call the police and get them back here.”

“It’ll take them at least twenty-minutes if they speed. Stay here, Hol. Don’t you dare open the door, and you lock it behind me, you hear?” Her mother left without taking a coat, wearing just her flannel button-up shirt and faded jeans.

Hollace hurried to her dad’s office, where he kept his gun cabinet; her mother hadn’t locked it after taking out the revolver. Hollace took down one of the shotguns Casey had taken her to target practice with, back when their parents were out. She loaded it, pulled on her coat, and headed outside. The shotgun was too heavy to hold a flashlight too, but as long as she stayed near the house, the porch floodlights would illuminate everything.

She headed toward the green light.

Her mother screamed and a shot went off.

“Mama!” Hollace took off across the yard, her breath panting in clouds in front of her mouth, one hand tight around the barrel of her weapon. The green light grew brighter as her mother shrieked again, louder.

Hollace rounded a bend in the dirt path to see a figure bending over her mother, what seemed to be a mouth closing in around her neck, the green light glowing within the monster’s chest. “Let her go!” Hollace paused to fire. The bullet struck in the cornfield with a ping and a boom, and the horses whinnied from their stable. Hollace ran closer to fire again and this time it hit the being in the shoulder. She fired twice more and her mother sagged to the ground, weeping. Hollace barreled forward to jab her shotgun at it until as though she had a bayonet.

“Get back.” Her mother shoved Hollace back so she could fire her revolver into the face. The cartridges ran out and they both sat on the cold

ground, tears drenching their cheeks and their lungs heaving.

"It's the scarecrow," her mother murmured. "Oh my gosh, it attacked me."

"It's just a scarecrow," Hollace said through numb lips.

Holes appeared in the shirt where they'd shot into it and globs of blood and fat dripped out into the weeds.

"Mama, is that…?" Her stomach clenched.

"Human guts." Her mother's voice squeaked. A pair of black-rimmed glasses identical to Casey's dropped out. "We're going to burn it, honey. We're going to burn this thing. We're going to make a bonfire."

"But… Daddy…He'll be back, right, Mama?" She drew a deep breath. "And Penelope and Casey.' A sob caught in her throat "And Mrs. French."

"Yes, honey, but right now, we're going to burn this *thing*."

They ripped the cornstalks out from behind it and they made a pillar around the bloody, carnivorous scarecrow. When they lit it, the fire transferred to the cornfield and they didn't care.

Her mother held her hand and neither spoke, not even when the fire trucks rolled up, with their sirens blaring, to put out the flames.

Everything would be fine, just as her mother had promised, because the scarecrow with the clown mask had become an ashy stick.

SEND IN THE CLOWNS

Anna Harris

It doesn't matter how you say it, rodie-oh, roe-dayo, (I say tom-ayto, you say tom-arto) it's guaranteed that when a rodeo comes to town, clowns come with it.

If you'd been taking a short spell from early morning's labour in a sun-drenched wheat paddock or happened to have glanced out from the cabin of your tractor as you made to turn back into the next plough line, you might've caught a glimpse of the odd horse float, or a truck or two, rumbling towards town through the haze of dust along Old Gluepot Road a good day and a half before Tully's annual event.

A day and a half. Hah! I've never understood what compels some people to want to be somewhere before all the others; First to cross the finish line, first to the moon, first to board the plane. What's the point? We all end up in the same place in the end. Dead.

Whether they came in first or last, though, I'm confident in saying you wouldn't have seen the clowns entering Tully country, for unlike their ebullient circus counterparts, rodeo clowns don't advertise their appearance in a flurry of lights and trumpets. They don't sneak into town exactly, but you never seen them arrive. Rodeo clowns go quietly about their business blending unobtrusively into their surroundings. Cowboy chameleons. You really only truly know they're there when you're in the unfortunate position of having needed one.

This Saturday, a couple of kilometres out of Tully, manes and tails were brushed and plaited amid horse whispered assurances, hay bale seats and barriers sprang up around a dusty central arena and anxious, cramped cattle got unloaded from transports and herded into a large maze of temporary holding pens where they bellowed their objections anew at roomier captivity.

Just beyond the periphery and aimed at all the would-be could-be wannabes, a decidedly slow mechanical bull kept a small but continuous crowd enthralled, whilst caravans deliberately wafting out the smell of hot oily food attracted other, less adventurous, locals. Flashing globes on a small city of mobile stalls and canvas tents coaxed potential customers to buy anything from brightly sequined cowgirl hats to foam drink coolers.

If the clowns ventured into that swell of marauding, excited yokels, no one would have known it. You, for example, were too preoccupied with your hotdog-on-a-stick and with finding the perfect place on the top tier at the back so you could see the action where the sun wouldn't be in your eyes later on in the morning. First to be seated.

You didn't see the clowns, I know you didn't. You've always been oblivious in that regard. You would, of course, already have scanned your leaflet for familiar names of riders who by now were out the back busy cleaning saddles and polishing boots in their camps behind the cattle pens. But anything else, anything outside your selfish, insular little sphere of recognition wouldn't have rated.

Mid-morning, as the speaker system crackled into anticipated existence and the pervading scent of manure gradually dulled out of consciousness, the junior events were introduced. Such talented youngsters and so many of them. Oh, how many incalculable hours they must have spent outside in all manner of weather, handing homework in late for the sake of perfecting control of their mounts whilst heat-scorched stage mothers and fathers looked on from atop fences with stop watches in hand, shouting instructions and heaping praise upon their miniature clones.

How old were they when they sat astride a horse and knew; knew it in their blood that they wanted to be a rodeo star? It's not the life for everyone, that's for sure. It involves a lot of travelling. Family life is sacrificed for the sake of following official competitions around the countryside. Reputations gradually build and points accumulate. It's not something that happens overnight. Soon they find themselves wishing away the days, months and then the years to get to the next rung of the ladder. Eventually, the in-it-for-fun brigade split. A hefty majority go back to their farms and families while for the rest, youthful enthusiasm warps into adult ambition. Most don't notice when it changes, can't pinpoint that defining moment when idealistic goals turn into a lust for winning. In their head they've always craved it; wanted more and more; wanted to be first.

With time trials and cattle roping team events out of the way, the old bloke who's failed at trying to be funny all day over the PA system hails everyone to attention. He's called for the rodeo competitors to walk out onto the arena for the National Anthem. This is what it's all about. This is why everyone's here. This is the stuff of little boys' and big men's fantasies alike.

And there they are; the stars adorned with brightly checked satin shirts and glittery tasselled chaps, lined up and wincing against the high mid afternoon sun, trying to muster their most serious expressions. Winning is serious business so they bow their heads, hats in hands, and let the music wash over them. You and I know they're not listening to the anthem. We know they're praying to their gods or rubbing at a rabbit's foot in their pocket or silently chanting for a win. Even at your age you can still recognise the hunger in their faces.

But have you noticed the clowns? Do you see them standing at the far end of the line? This one with the yellow shirt and red pants, that one with the striped trousers and blue hair? And the others that never get the trophies; never get the girl. Nobody ever remembers their names.

When a rider goes down and the crazed beast charges, you'll be looking for them then, though. Send in the clowns. There's got to be clowns.

That's when your attention will at last be drawn to the technicoloured distraction diverting the enraged animal from the fallen hero. The clown will confront the wild, red-eyed bull, fully prepared to have his life force gored out of his body if it means saving the rider everyone's come to see. He'll step between life and death and he'll do it several times over just in this one afternoon, putting his own survival in the hands of speed, talent and fate and when the people's hero scrambles back up and over the wooden gate to safety, the vivid flash of colour diving anonymously back into a barrel out of sight will be immediately forgotten as the man of the moment gives a magnanimous wave to his adoring fans.

The glint in your pale old eyes is unmistakeable. You're remembering a time when you were one of those flashy rodeo stars, back before age and arthritis took their toll. Did you ever think of me or any of the other clowns as you received your accolades, as you stood on the dais holding that shining golden chalice above your head?

Hush now. Don't call out. Don't try to warn anybody. It won't do you much good, anyway because nobody's looking at you. These days you're among the forgotten, as invisible as I've always been. Now we're just two old faces in a crowd. Everyone is focused on those new, fresh young boys out there in the centre and not one of them will be looking at this aged, retired clown thrusting his blade into your thankless body.

Don’t make a fuss. Go with the flow and feel my short sharp knife piercing your ribs again and again just like the bull I saved you from did to me. And as rich red hero blood slowly ebbs out of you, I dare you to try to remember my name, any clown’s name.

It won’t matter if you don’t. You see, we follow the rodeo competitions around the countryside, catching up with all the old past champions. We’ve many more scores to settle, me and my clown cohorts. When a rodeo comes to town, clowns come with it. We go quietly about our business blending unobtrusively into our surroundings. Cowboy chameleons. You’ll really only truly know we’re here if you’re in the unfortunate position of having needed one.

So bleed away, old hero, bleed away. We eventually all end up in the same place but I’ve had a lifetime of not being first. I don’t mind arriving after you.

AUGUSTINE

A. J. Humpage

Distant voices, like ribbons of sound, threaded through the empty hallways and seeped through the fabric of the house, followed by a rash of staccato steps across wooden floorboards.

A child's voice echoed through the main hallway and drifted up the stairs, announcing their arrival to the empty house. 'Daddy, which is my room?'

The little girl's father, Michael, followed her. "Why don't you take a look and tell me which room you want?"

Twelve year old Abby Torrington rushed to the top of the staircase. Muted light filtered through dusty window panes and dappled her face. She walked along the barren corridor, parted reluctant shadows. She peered up at the high ceilings, noticed the pretty, ornate plasterwork and recessed alcoves. She knew it was an old house – her mother had been keen for an older house with character, rather than the insipid new houses that her friends lived in.

She moved down the hallway and pushed the door open to the first room. She peered around the doorframe, but the room – smaller than she expected – seemed devoid of colour or warmth. She dismissed it and shuffled to the next room. The door already lay open.

She poked her head around the doorframe as though spying on the shadows, saw furniture covered by dust sheets, but the windows seemed too small and didn't let in enough light.

She continued down the corridor, came to a pale green door. She opened it and stood on the threshold, gazed at the large room, full with recessed shelves and ornate cornices. A set of two large windows allowed the bright glaze of winter light to flood in. Abby guessed from the patterned, floral wallpaper that the room must have once belonged to a little girl.

She ran over to the windows, regarded the town in the distance and the church spire that poked above the glare. Her lips curved into a smile. She heard her father behind her, glanced at him with an approving expression.

He smiled from the doorway.

But something drew her attention from her father; a large painting on the far wall, bathed in shadows, as though averse to the light. She left the pristine brightness that streamed through the windows and moved across the wooden floor. She peered up at the carved gold frame and the intricate, coiling patterns, but it wasn't the frame that had lured her, but rather the painting of a clown, hunched over a table and clutching a small mirror as he applied his makeup.

A shadow entered the room. "I take it you like this bedroom."

Abby turned to her father. "I like it, I'm not sure about this big old picture, though."

Her father approached. "I never noticed it when we viewed the house, but I guess we didn't pay much attention to all the old stuff in these rooms." He blew dust from the painting, touched it. "This is a genuine oil on canvas..."

Abby looked up at him, face furrowed. "What does that mean?"

"It means it's not a printed one," he replied. "It's been painted with oil paints." He looked for a name on the painting, noticed the faint black scrawl tucked in the corner of the frame. He bent forward, read it. "Augustine... 1884." He straightened, shrugged. "It's not an artist I've heard of. It's so well painted, very life-like, don't you think? I might research it."

Abby stared at the figure; a clown without humour and in particular, his reflection in the mirror in his hand, the cold eyes hiding beneath the gaudy face paint and bright orange hair. The corners of his mouth were turned down, as though troubled. "He looks weird."

Her father inspected the brush strokes. "How do you mean?"

"I don't find clowns funny. I don't get the bright, silly hair and stupid painted faces," she said. "He doesn't look funny at all. He looks creepy."

Her father smiled. "That's the style of clown, Abby. Clowns usually had bright red or green hair, with big thick painted eyebrows like this one and a white muzzle and big red nose. Their exaggerated expressions were meant to make them stand out while they performed in the circus, so everyone could see their faces."

Abby gazed at the painted face reflected in the small mirror in the clown's left hand. "He's not smiling. I think he looks kind of sad."

Her father shrugged. "Perhaps he was sad, who knows?" He moved, steered her away from the picture. "Come on, you can help me and Mom unpack."

After dinner, Abby went back to her bedroom and unpacked some of her boxes. The recessed shelves provided a home for her books, while the wide window ledges were large enough for her collection of porcelain dolls. She picked out various outfits for them whilst listening to music on her iPod, then dressed one of the dolls.

Movement. Fleeting.

She looked up, thought she'd seen a passing shadow in the corner of her eye, despite the main light glowing bright overhead, but there was nothing. She blinked hard. Still nothing.

She dismissed it and finished dressing the doll. She placed it on the window ledge and rested it against the frame. The darkness of evening pressed against the windows, made her look up. It smothered the lights of the town in the distance with a thick, inky maw. She saw her reflection in the glass, thought how strange it looked; distorted, opaque, but something moved in her peripheral vision – shapeless and dark – and she spun round, heart quickening… yet there was nothing there, nothing but a tired imagination getting used to the surrounds of a new house.

She gazed around the room, utterly convinced of moving shapes, but the light remained unfettered by any shadows.

The darkened far wall drew her attention to the clown in the painting as imaginary whispers surfed the stillness and fingered her conscience. She stared at his reflection and her skin prickled as though caught in a cold draft. Something about the clown's desolate eyes bored into her, rather like he was reaching into her skull with spiny fingers to claw at her brain.

A knock at the bedroom door startled her from her silence.

Her mother poked her head around the door. "Honey, it's bedtime. Thirty minutes, then lights out."

Abby nodded, grabbed her pyjamas from the bed and made her way to the bathroom to brush her teeth.

Silence gathered in the bedroom, coiling around the bed and the bedside cabinet as though sniffing out her palpable, raw scent. The temperature dropped slightly, hovered between pleasant and deceptively cool. The light remained bright against flush surfaces.

Except for the far wall, where the shadows gathered and lingered.

Abby breezed back into the bedroom; now dressed in her pyjamas and immediately felt the cool air kiss her skin. She climbed into bed, pulled the covers up for warmth and rested back into the pillows. She tried to

ignore the painting directly in front of her, but she couldn't and she found herself staring at the stooped figure as though compelled to do so, studying every dab of colour, every line, every flick of the artist's brush.

The clown's wretched expression seemed to burn bright through her conscience, stirring her abstract thoughts. Her father was right; the clown was so lifelike that she could imagine him applying his clown makeup while the sounds and chaos of the circus encircled him, and yet, the more she stared at him, the more her mind drowned in his speculative glint; his troubled eyes seemed so real that he could turn from his reflection at any moment and face her.

Her eyelids drooped, lulled by the silence.

Sleep came quickly, like a crushing wave and by the time her mother came to turn the light off, Abby had fallen into deep slumber.

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Sunlight forged a path through the windows the next morning and fell across Abby's face. Her eyes shuttered and she unfurled from her nest. Out in the corridor she heard her mother moving about, but the sounds seemed strangely distant and muted, because despite just waking from slumber, all Abby could focus on was the clown in the painting.

She got out of bed and wandered over to the picture.

The colours seemed brighter to Abby – deep reds and yellows and splashes of white all seemed as though they had been freshly painted, but she realised it must have been the glare from the sunlight that made the painting seem so vivid and stark.

But something else bothered her. Last night while staring at the painting – and embedding it to memory – she was quite sure that the clown had been holding the white make-up stick in his right hand, as though about to apply it to his face, but now the stick lay next the mirror.

Faint lines rippled across her forehead as she thought; she shook her head, doubted herself, but the more she stared at it, the more convinced she became that she must have *imagined* the clown had been holding the makeup stick.

But she couldn't fathom why she would have imagined it in the first place.
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The creak of the door behind her brought her to. She turned. Her father swung the door open. “Breakfast is ready.”

“I don’t like this painting, Daddy,” Abby said, business-like. “I don’t like it in my bedroom, I want you take it down.”

“But why? It’s a great painting.”

“I really don’t like it.”

Michael approached her. “Abby, it’s just an old painting of a clown. Very old. In fact, it’s one hundred and twenty eight years old.”

She shrugged. “Don’t care, it’s creepy.”

“Creepy?” He laughed, his tone mocking the crowding silence. “It’s a clown. Clowns aren’t creepy, they’re fun.”

“It scares me. It’s like he’s real or something. I swear he’s moved.”

“Moved?” Incredulous colours shaded Michael’s skin. “Now you’re being silly.”

“I’m telling you, Daddy, I think it’s moved. Last night he was holding that makeup stick, I know he was.” She pointed. ‘Now it’s on the table.’

He stared at the painting. It looked no different to him. He directed a slender finger at her forehead. “I think you’re letting that imagination of yours run away with you.” He smiled, if only to appease her. “Last night I went online to see if I could find an artist called Augustine, but I couldn’t find much, certainly no famous ones. I did find a reference to this clown, though.” He bent forward for emphasis, thumbed the painting. “This clown is named Augustine. He was a famous Parisian clown, born in 1854, but he was also an artist and I think this is his self-portrait. This is Augustine.”

She shrugged, appeared unmoved by the revelation, if only to fool her father that it didn’t prick her latent curiosity. “I don’t care who painted it, I don’t like it. Anyway, Augustine is a girl’s name.”

“In France, it’s also a boy’s name,” Michael replied.

She folded her arms; her defence against his rebuff. “Maybe the last owner didn’t like it and that’s why they left it behind.”

He didn’t look at her. “Actually, the last owner never came back to claim it, nor the furniture he left behind.”

“How come?”

“The family moved away. They say that one of the children went missing, that maybe she ran away from home.”

“You mean they never found her.” A statement, not a question.

“No they didn’t. She completely vanished, but that happened many years ago,” he said, watching the surprise unfurl in her expression. “The house has virtually been empty since then, that’s why your mom and I got a good deal on it. After some DIY and attention it will be a great home for us. Anyway, you never know, this painting might be worth some money. I could get it valued.”

Abby snorted. “Daddy, my dolls are probably worth more than this stupid painting!”

He headed for the door. “Yeah… somehow I doubt it.”

She turned from the clown. “What happened to him anyway?”

The clown, she meant.

Michael stopped at the door, contemplated his daughter’s tight expression. He knew what had happened to Augustine, but he decided against telling her the truth, especially since she didn’t like the painting and found it creepy. The truth would make her worse.

He forged a lie on his tongue. “He worked in the circus all his life and died of old age in Paris.”

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The painting creaked.

Flecks of colour dropped onto the floor. Tiny cracks fluttered across the surface. The canvas stretched slightly, as though breathing before becoming still.

The sunlight that had filled the bedroom that morning had been replaced by a lingering, maudlin greyness and, once again, the far wall and the painting fell into familiar, eerie shadow.

Abby raced through front door and hung her coat on the hook. She shouted to her mother that she was home from school and made her way upstairs with her school bag.

The felt the cool air tickle her skin as she entered her bedroom. She had noticed the cold atmosphere as she had ascended the stairs, despite the heating being on, but her room seemed shrouded with a frosty bite.

She put her bag on the bed, looked at the shadows shrouding the painting.

Once again the vacant eyes lured her and she drifted over to the painting and peered at it, as though trying to penetrate the layers of colour.
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She reached up, touched it, felt the ridges and bumps and curves of the paint strokes, but then she noticed fine flakes of colour scattered along on the frame. She looked down at her feet, saw faint spots of yellow-ochre paint. She looked at the painting again, utterly convinced that the clown's hand had moved slightly from this morning.

But it was a painting. Paintings didn't move.

Puzzled, and perturbed, she turned from it and made her way to the schoolbag. She removed her books and homework, but as she did so she heard a scratching sound from somewhere off to her left. She glanced over her shoulder, listened.

Something gnawing, like a rodent.

It was an old house, she expected there to be mice under the floorboards or in the skirting and, although she wasn't scared of them, the strange unearthly sounds still unsettled her.

She closed her bag.

More scratching. The sound seemed closer and yet she was unable to pinpoint exactly where.

She scanned along the skirting for tell-tale shadows scuttling across the floor, but there was nothing. She took a few steps towards the painting, her eyes never leaving the outline of the hunched clown. Somewhere in the back of her mind she half expected him to fully turn around, jump out at her and grab her, but that was ridiculous and she cursed herself for allowing her imagination to dilute her mind so easily with absurdity.

Another sound punctured the hush, somewhere near the painting.

Abby reached up and slightly pulled the painting away from the wall, peered around the back of the frame. She half expected to see a mouse, but she found only the dusty bare wall. She inspected the frame, saw more flecks of paint.

Piqued, she turned and made her way out of the bedroom and downstairs. She hurried along the hall and entered her father's study, saw boxes yet to be unpacked stacked against the far wall.

"Daddy?"

She wandered over to the desk sited beneath the window, scattered with various architectural drawings and papers, as well as a laptop computer.

She picked up a sheet full of text, saw that her father had printed it from the internet and had circled parts of the text with a red pen. She read

the highlighted sections; saw that he had been researching Augustine.

Her expression gradually unfurled as she read. The piece of paper trembled in her grip.

"Abby?"

The male voice startled her and she almost dropped the paper. She sucked in a sharp breath, looked up.

Her father approached. "What are you doing?"

"I came to find you..." She dropped the paper back on his desk.

"You know you shouldn't be snooping in here."

"I came to ask why you haven't taken the painting down," she said, her tone serrated. "I told you I didn't want it in my bedroom."

He saw the printed sheets. "I was going to do it later."

She moved from the desk. "You lied, Daddy."

He knew what she meant. He saw through her disapproving veil.

'You said the clown died of old age. You *lied*.'

He came forward and sat in the chair. "I know I did and I'm sorry, but I felt it was the best thing to tell you. I didn't want you to know the truth because it would frighten you. I figured that what you didn't know wouldn't hurt you."

Her tone shifted. "I said it was creepy and I'm right. I'm not going back to my bedroom until you've moved it. All the paint is coming off it anyhow, it's cracking."

"Cracking?" He looked concerned."What do you mean?"

"It's flaking away."

He moved. "Come on, I'll take the painting down right now."

She followed her father out of the study and up the stairs, trying to keep up with his long strides. She followed him into the bedroom, but then abruptly stopped, as though an invisible force had jolted her in the chest. Her breath lodged in her throat.

The painting. No longer hanging, but propped against the wall.

"You should have waited for me to do it, Abby," Michael chided. "You could have hurt yourself moving something so big."

She stared at it, perplexed and slightly fearful that it had moved, or had fallen from the wall. Her voice shuddered. "But I didn't move it.'"

Michael looked at her. 'Right, it moved of its own accord.'

She then noticed the clown was no longer looking at his reflection in the mirror, but instead he was glancing over his shoulder with a menacing,

conceited glint. She edged back to the doorway. “Daddy, he’s moved...”

Michael picked the painting up. “Don’t be ridiculous, Abby. Of course he hasn’t moved.”

“He was looking at the mirror before,” she said. “Now he’s looking over his shoulder. Look at his eyes. *Look*!”

He ignored her, expelled a short frustrated breath. “This is why I didn’t tell you about Augustine and why you shouldn’t have been mooching in my study, because now your imagination’s run riot.”

Abby locked onto Augustine’s eyes; empty dark orbs, as cold and as soulless as a starless cosmos, yet somehow threatening. “That’s probably why the paint’s flaked. Because he moved. I heard scratching earlier.”

Michael manhandled the painting. “I hope you haven’t been messing with the paint surface, you could have irrevocably damaged it.”

“I told you. I haven’t touched it.”

“Well, paint doesn’t just fall off of its own accord, Abby.”

She glared at him from beneath lowered lids. “But I didn’t touch it.”

“Honestly, Abby, just because you don’t like the painting doesn’t mean you can mess around with it and potentially destroy it,” he said. “Time to stop all this nonsense. What have we told you about lying?”

“It’s not nonsense,” she shot back. “And I’m not lying. You were the one that lied to me, remember? About the clown.”

Michael chewed his jowls; couldn’t retort in the face of her truth to his contradiction. “I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

“I bet that’s why the last owner ran away and left it. The clown moved and it frightened them away. Or maybe they found out what Augustine did to children and that’s why all them people killed him...”

Michael stopped by the door, his face centimetres away from Augustine’s sinister features. “Abby, it’s a painting, that’s all it is. And it was never proved that Augustine took or hurt any children, it’s just hearsay and conjecture and silly old wives’ tales. He was just a clown, for Christ’s sake.”

“But they killed him though.”

He stood in the doorway. “Yeah, the people of Paris did kill him, but they might have killed an innocent man, because he was never proven guilty. They killed him on nothing more than rumour and gossip.” He sighed. “People are like that sometimes, Abby. They take matters into their

own hands, even though they don't have all the facts. Poor Augustine was a victim of other people's fear."

Abby shrank back from her father's heavy expression, watched as he dragged the painting out of the bedroom. She ran forward and slammed the door behind him, tears forging a path down her ruddy cheeks, a tight bundle of emotion knotting in her chest.

Despite her clamouring thoughts, she *knew* there was something bad about the painting, even if her father didn't – or wouldn't – believe her. It *had* moved. *Augustine* had moved.

But she was safe now; safe from the clown, because at last, she no longer had to look at it and it was finally out of her bedroom.

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That evening, a cool darkness swirled through hallways and lingered like an unwanted foul odour. Silence crept like an interloper, slithering from room to room, numbing the air as it went, all except for the study.

There, the air became still and dank.

But the silence gave way to many different sounds; sounds of stretching, scratching. *Breathing*.

The painting creaked.

Something slithered beneath the canvas and large flakes of paint peeled away as the material flexed. Slowly, a shape appeared, as though drowning beneath silken sheets. First the shape of a mouth, open as though screaming, then a large forehead, then tips of fingers, pulsing and pushing beneath the canvas... pushing until a tearing sound spliced the silence and the painting split open to reveal a darkness which spilled out like innards into the cumulative silence, before retreating and spreading into the shadowy corners of the study.

A white gloved hand reached out, as though testing the air, before withdrawing.

From a blackened alcove, he gazed through the slit; dark, gleamless eyes set cold like stone, staring through the dusk as though to slice it in two.

He blinked. Then he eased forward through the tear in the canvas, his garish, painted face emerging into the twilight; his sneer wide across his mouth and, despite the clumsy, tattered jacket and wiry hair, he effortlessly glided from the painting and slowly unfurled from his cold, infinite sleep.
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A hazy mist coiled around him as he straightened – he barely stood five feet. He sniffed the air with an appreciative glean; the raw scent of a child lingered like dust particles trapped in the light.

He crept forward through the dusky study, opened the door out onto the hallway. The stairs beckoned.

Foul breath misted the air as he eased forward to rattle the silence. He gazed up at the staircase. He could smell her; moist and malleable and oozing delicious energy.

His shadow slowly ascended the stairs as though to push aside the darkness, accompanied by a monotonous, distant heartbeat which echoed through the murk, as though lost within the confines of the house.

Glassy eyes emerged through the maw and peered over the balustrade. He reached the landing and listened, his figure silhouetted by the faint moonlight outside the window. He drifted like a sinister fog towards the green door on the far left, slightly stooped as he entered the hallway.

At last, he reached her door.

Silence flocked as he turned the handle and the gentle click of the door allowed him inside.

He closed his eyes for a moment as he sucked in her perfume; the hint of childhood innocence tingled on his tongue; the flowery perfume of a fresh, virginal child.

His deathly mist drifted low across the floor; smelled like sulphur.

She rested on her back, one arm on the pillow beside her head, her hair streaming across the pillow like a golden cascade, eyes closed to the spectre in the doorway.

He crept to the foot of her bed, lingered there as he listened to her breathing. He had watched her every night, peering at her through the painting, waiting for the moment when he had gleaned enough of her energy to escape the confines of his prison.

He remembered the night they came for him; screeching men and women waving fire and cudgels, the grave look of hatred and intent scratched across their wretched faces, their hands clawing at his clothes, then his flesh, then the slicing of knives through sinew and muscle.

He remembered the terrible darkness that came and ripped him from his mortal shell at that moment and the only escape for his sullied essence was to flee into the self-portrait he had painted, to breathe life into the

figure hunched over the table, a darkness where he hid and waited for the right source of energy – children – to steal and absorb and grow ever stronger.

They had killed him, but not his malevolent spirit. They had simply made him eternal.

And now after so many years waiting patiently, Augustine reached out and carefully pulled the sheets away from Abby's body.

Deep in slumber, Abby barely moved.

Then, like a vile shadow hewn from the darkness, he climbed onto the bed and slowly crawled up her body.

Movement coiled around Abby's muted conscience; she stirred, sighed and then settled, but a sense of coldness pressed against her skin and a foul odour – rancid like death – slithered down her throat and her breathing stuttered.

He breathed across her pasty skin, needy. His lungs rattled, sounded more like a deathly growl.

That made her eyes flutter open; instantly dilating at the sight of him hovering over her.

He saw her reaction, the terror of his gaudy reflection flashed in her curdled expression, but immediately he clamped a gloved hand over her mouth and stifled the scream caught in her throat.

He laughed into the soured darkness. 'Bonsoir, mademoiselle...'

A cold unpalatable silence descended as he moved in.

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Augustine liked the ordinary. It brought with it a sense of familiarity.

Time had remained irrelevant to him, a perception not recognised, for he was and had been eternally patient, unwearied by the passage of days, or the burdens of night.

He had stared at his reflection in the painting for decades; the sullen shades of colour had diminished with the passage of time and once vibrant shades of crimson and cadmium had become burnished, but now they would blossom once again.

It had been a long time since he had seen his true reflection.

It had been a long time since he'd taken his last child, who had disappeared from the house almost twelve years earlier. She had been young
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and supple and delicate and he'd enjoyed every moment of her.

But Abby was even better; he couldn't have wished for a better prize.

He dragged Abby's lifeless body from the bedroom and back through the darkness clogging the hallway; then he carried her down the stairs to the study.

Her skin had become pale; blue tinted lips. Spots of blood stained her nightie; thin beads dribbled down her thighs and left a faint trail.

He hauled her past the desk, but he saw something which caught his attention, a printed press cutting highlighted by moon glow. He fingered it, saw his name.

Death of Circue d'Hiver Buffoon: Famous Auguste clown found hung and mutilated...

He breathed heavily into the cool air, like a panting primeval animal. He smirked beneath his face paint. One hundred and twenty eight years on, he had not faded into oblivion.

He turned and easily lifted Abby's tiny body and pushed her through the tear in the painting and into the blackest darkness that awaited her. She would nourish him for a long time.

He crept back into the opening, shrank into the cosseted blackness.

The tear in the canvas closed up behind him and both the paint and the material fused together seamlessly, leaving behind a fetid, stagnant silence.

It was only a matter of time before he could feed again from so much young, visceral energy.

Only a matter of time before the next soft, supple child to devour.

As moonlight ebbed and parried around the study, the eerie figure of a hunched clown took his place at his table, picked up his little mirror and his stick of white make up and peered at his lurid reflection within the painting on the wall.

But this time the clown in the mirror was finally smiling.

THE JOLLY MAN

Ken Goldman

“And if I laugh at any mortal thing, ‘Tis that I may not weep. ”
Lord Byron (1788 -1824)

North Carolina State Fairgrounds, Wake County
Wednesday April 4, 12:18 a.m.

Trina heard him coming. It would have been near impossible not to detect the footsteps increasing behind her. His shoes squeaked like trampled mice.

In heels and unable to move quickly she spun around, having prepared an indignant “You buyin’ or just lookin’?’” remark to demonstrate she was not frightened. She had turned enough tricks with these fly-by-night carnies to expect almost anything lumbering out of the shadows after the fairground crowd had gone home. Still, the rainbow of pancake make-up smearing the man’s features startled her. The bright orange fright wig, the bulbous nose, his smiling painted mouth especially, all seemed intended to unnerve when encountered past midnight.

In the darkness of the deserted midway, Trina had become so distracted by the costume she almost missed the meat cleaver in the man’s hand. Then she caught herself, half smiling at the sick joke. Imitating her, the clown smiled too, teeth stained with flecks of greasepaint framing his lips. He looked at the shining object he held as if noticing it for the first time and saying nothing, scratched his wigged scalp, seeming confused why the sharpened cleaver was even there. He dug deep inside his kangaroo pouch pocket and produced another one, then a third. Expertly juggling all three, he coaxed a smile from the woman. Trina ran her fingers through a head filled with too many curls, relieved at her own foolishness. Here was just another guy probably hoping to get a quick blow job behind the trailers.

Enjoying a good laugh, she took a moment to apply more lip gloss, noticing only one cleaver’s handle remained in the man’s fist, its steel blade above her catching the moonlight.

She managed to mutter “What are you do-?”

The clown's eyes widened. He studied Trina's painted mouth, then buried most of the cleaver in her forehead. Warm trickles veined the rims of the girl's nose, thick rivulets staining her rouged cheeks. The pain waited until she touched the broadening dark smear in her blonde curls and realized her fingers dripped. Buckling, she fell to her knees, dimly aware the jester was tugging the blade from her skull, preparing for a second swing. Trina managed only a guttural squeak before the man hovered over her, smiling his redundant grin, the meat cleaver again held high.

She whimpered like a confused child, alive enough to hear the thick splattering of the submerged cleaver as it split her brain.

Old Orchard National Park, Maine, Saturday May 19, 2:37 p.m.

It wasn't a new routine; it wasn't even original. Beneath the Big Top a child sized mini-car circled the center ring, honking and careening wildly, belching fire from its tailpipe and hiking up upon its rear wheels while an imperiled ringmaster pretended to scamper for safety like a penguin waddling double time.

Although Rosalie knew what was coming next, she couldn't restrain her laughter. What adult hadn't seen this classic circus sight-gag at least a dozen times? But her Marianna never had a real father to bring her to the circus. Clocking more overnight miles on I-95 than he had bothered scribbling into his log book, twenty miles north of Hartford Billy C. McKiever had rolled over the Tommy Mack Fresh Produce eighteen-wheeler filled with assorted Jersey vegetables. He lay soaked in a tossed salad that stretched a quarter mile, cold dead before ever seriously having considered making an honest woman of the girl he had knocked up two hours into their first date.

For Rosalie's child this circus routine was a first and that made the mother's laughter genuine. When clown after clown crawled from the small vehicle that wore the Palestri Brothers logo, little Marianna clapped her hands with delight. This moment alone was worth the price of admission.

The clowns scrambled about the arena doing what clowns do, chasing one another while occasionally bopping heads or falling on asses that honked raspberries like oversized whoopee cushions. Some of them turned quizzically towards the crowd, displaying noses morphed into illuminated red bulbs. One particularly sadistic buffoon baited the others to

approach him, then produced a seltzer bottle which doused his companions' painted faces.

With no rhyme or reason the requisite shenanigans continued for several minutes to the delight of dozens of children. Most adults in the stands grinned with mild bemusement without seeming especially entertained, but Rosalie laughed spiritedly and sincerely. She laughed until her eyes waded in tears and her sides hurt, laughed even during the pauses when everyone else in the stands had stopped. Memories flooded over her and long dead ghosts whispered.

["Your papa loves to see his little angel laugh ..."]

Marianna turned to her mother, studying the woman's twitching mouth before venturing her question, the child's expression turning serious in the midst of the rollicking clown act below.

"Mama, are you all right?"

The daughter had caught her parent off guard while Rosalie had lost herself in a bittersweet reverie of childhood memories. The woman's recollections had translated into uncontrollable fits of laughter at the sight of the tumbling jesters in the arena below. Embarrassed, she forced herself back to the present, allowing the roving scents of popcorn and peanuts, sweat and animal shit to fill her nostrils.

"I'm fine, baby. I was just remembering the first time I came to the circus. It all came flooding back just now, is all."

But that *wasn't* all. Rosalie's old man had not been the fall-down drunk he would become later during that extraordinary summer's afternoon beneath the Palestri Brothers' circus tent twenty years gone, back when you could bet the ranch that Salvatore Carillo would slide a clammy hand beneath his young daughter's underpants whenever the stink of Jack Daniels lingered on his breath. During those puzzling moments of her youth her father would whisper into her ear, his old buckskin coat smelling of stale beer, reminding her how good little girls never revealed very special secrets.

She never did.

["Who's her Papa's perfect little angel? Who? Who?"]

Men seemed such mystifying creatures, secretive and dangerous even while playing lovable buffoons. They were kindred spirits to those idiotic clowns down in that ring, forever swilling beer with others like themselves

until they fell over laughing and roaring drunk, making you laugh uneasily even as they tore the panties right off your ass to have their way with you.

[" ... Jes' a little touch, Rosa, while your mama's still asleep ..."]

One brisk autumn day Salvatore made the hare-brained mistake of deer hunting while wearing that same foul-smelling buckskin coat. By then Rosalie was a wizened fourteen and had hidden his bright orange hunting vest, hoping the old deer hunter might fuck up. Already on his second six pack, he did. Some college kid from Portland, whose buck fever made him a little fast on the trigger, blew away most of Carillo's intestines with one shot of his Mini 14. It was a stupid way for a man to die. Stupid and fitting.

Rosalie was feeling unusually warm under this circus tent. Fortunately, the rollicking clowns had distracted Marianna from further questions. The tiny clown car stayed in the center ring after the rest of the painted gang had scampered off and the comedy portion of the show seemed completed. But there remained a last rabbit to pull from the hat. One leftover clown climbed quietly from the vehicle and stood alone in the center of the great arena. In the blazing ambush of spotlight he lingered there, dwarfed, motionless, appearing deadpan even while wearing his painted grin, toying with a crowd that had no idea what to expect.

This clown was not like the others. More colorfully costumed, he seemed younger and taller. Rosalie pictured toned muscles rippling beneath the man's exaggerated garments, then felt ashamed for connecting this ludicrous thought to bleary memories of her father. But if her mind needed to travel along some other track, this one felt as good as any. She stared at the man in the orange fright wig below, certain that beneath the jester's greasepaint hid a face that was anything but clown-like. No amount of cosmetics could mask his chiseled jaw and Rosalie wondered if other women in the crowd saw what she did.

*[Damn, how could any woman with working estrogen **not** see?]*

The P.A. announcer's understated tone seemed almost disquieting. Gone was any hint of derision that might sneak into the introduction of a professional buffoon. The speaker sounded almost reverent.

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages ... your attention is drawn to the center ring where The Palestri Brothers present the unparalleled talents of ... Mister Jolly!"

Marianna leaned forward in her seat. Instinctively, so did Rosalie. For several moments the clown below stood taking deep bows as if the

simple act of standing there were a performance in itself. The crowd applauded and cheered, playing along with the communal joke because they had seen only the man's bows.

For no earthly reason the clown decided time had come for a shave and searched through his pockets for the appropriate implement. He was able to produce only a meat cleaver to do the job and a can of shaving cream. Some juggling was in order and he tossed can and cleaver into the air. Suddenly two additional meat cleavers appeared and he juggled these also, managing to lather his face while giving himself a shave with each of the three instruments. The audience roared and the clown again bowed.

When the clamor tapered off, silence followed, a thick uneasy stillness that suggested *"All right, then, that's done. Now we're going to get down to some serious business here, boys and girls."* Most of the children recognized this; the few who didn't were quickly hushed by parents. Strange that here was a clown who insisted on his moment of solemnity, but Rosalie sat transfixed. Something dangerous was coming, something unpredictable and exciting and that was what the circus was all about.

The clown pulled from his pouch a cigar that looked like a small baseball bat, lighting it with a loud *poof!* But the jokester wasn't mindful where he tossed his match and it fell inside the multi-colored clown car close by. The vehicle ignited with a flash to the contrived astonishment of the cigar-puffing jester. He turned and performed a double take as flames danced around his cherished automobile. Stomping out his cigar like a madman on a trampoline, he ran panic stricken about the vehicle, pantomiming his great dismay to the crowd. Several clowns entered the ring oblivious to poor Jolly's confusion, a very short clown eating a large breast of chicken while pushing another inside a wheeled tub of water in which, for no coherent reason, he sat scrubbing himself while taking a bath.

Now the children in the stadium took to their feet, screaming and laughing "Put it out! Put it out!" But the bathing clown had gotten soap in his eyes and paid no attention to them. A rag-tag hobo entered the ring dragging a huge tank that read "Kerosene." Of course, none of this made any sense, but in the absurd village of Clown Town none of this had to. The sad faced tramp spotted the befuddled Jolly and decided that he might be of assistance. Jolly filled a bucket from his tank and now a hundred children's voices warned "No! No!"

He toyed with them, pretending not to understand; then he tossed the kerosene directly on the car, and with a thunderous explosion the flames shot fifty feet or more. A few uneasy adult spectators squirmed in their seats, but the laughs kept coming.

Rosalie's memory joggled.

[Something familiar here, something so damned familiar.]

As the clown car immersed in flames, the confounded Jolly faked a burlesque anxiety attack, rolling about the ground like an over-wound toy. Removing a huge hanky from his pouch he blew his nose *(Ah-hoooga!! Ah-hoooga!!!)* but the honking continued even after he stopped. Now completely confused, he spun like a dervish until the realization struck. The inflamed car's horn was calling to him! In an act of ersatz bravado, he tossed free the outer garments of his clown suit. Wearing only his red flannel underwear he was going to rescue his wailing automobile.

Rosalie remembered now. She had seen this sketch once before, the afternoon her father had brought her to the Palestri Brothers Circus in Portland years earlier. Of course another man must have performed the 'Mister Jolly' act back then, but the skit remained the same. Her heart racing with the memory, she recalled the incredible moment that was coming next. Still in his red flannels, the clown dashed through the inferno into his burning car, disappearing amid the roaring wall of fire. Rosalie recollected how the crowd had gasped years earlier and sure enough they did it again.

The powerful explosion could have cracked the tent's support beams in half and its thunder brought the audience to its feet and sent the ringside clowns scampering out of sight. Somewhere behind Rosalie a woman screamed. A huge belch of black smoke appeared where the small clown car had stood, with the valiant young Jolly trapped inside. Some adult spectators stood in open-mouthed silence as the bellows of smoke climbed skyward, uncertain whether they were witnessing a terrible accident. Many older children appeared suspicious too.

Marianna turned to her mother. Her lips quivered, and tears did not seem far off. "Is Mister Jolly dead, Mama?"

It appeared he must be, but Rosalie remembered this was part of the act, meant only to quicken the pulse.

"No, honey, he's fine. Just wait and see." She hoped she sounded convincing.

In fact, anyone with a working knowledge of pyrotechnics knew that Mister Jolly was better than fine. When the smoke cleared the rainbow colored car had burned to a blackened crisp, but after the door swung open no silly-assed clown emerged. The subterfuge complete, from the vehicle sprang instead an impossibly handsome man who had earlier hidden himself behind the clown's colorful greasepaint, the last stubborn remains of cosmetic silt dripping from his face. He no longer wore the red flannels and wig but stood taking his bows in faded jeans and muscle shirt, one bona fide specimen of sweating manhood newly born inside this center ring chrysalis. The crowd rose to its feet whistling and cheering for the dark haired showman who basked in the spotlight, enjoying his moment of celebrity. Rosalie found herself cheering among the loudest of them.

It was a wonderful moment to share with her child, especially wonderful because of its personal significance as one of the few glorious memories of the woman's own youth when she and her father together laughed. But on that long ago day the laughs proved short-lived, because something had gone horribly wrong. Some other Mister Jolly never made it out of that clown car. Rosalie had been there to see the whole thing when the vehicle had combusted and the man emerged like a human torch engulfed amid the thick flames in full view of hundreds of horrified onlookers. He managed a few faltering steps before he fell, rolling and heaving in his dance of agony like a bug on a griddle. Those with hoses could not extinguish the dying clown before his entire body blackened, his flesh burned to a crispy ash in the flare. Throughout the huge tent people refused to stop shrieking and their echoes reverberated inside Rosalie's brain for weeks.

One dangerous creature, this stranger behind the clown paint, one unpredictable and exciting brute of a man with secrets to conceal ...

An audacious resolution was born that moment. The young mother took her daughter's hand, leaning close and whispering into the little girl's ear, hoping her voice revealed nothing of the excitement she felt when she spoke the man's name. It wasn't his real name, of course, but Rosalie felt the warm dampness between her legs simply pronouncing it.

"Would you like to come with me to meet Mister Jolly, sweetheart?"

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Unlike other performers, the enigmatic Jolly did not linger after the show to shake hands and chew the fat with inquiring curiosity seekers. But Rosalie's determination pushed her on and luckily the clown's trailer situated just off the dirt road wasn't hard to find. Set apart from the rest of them by a tangle of rotted trees, his unit was painted in the familiar reds and greens that were the jester's trademarks. A huge depiction of the clown's painted face covered the van's entire side. Locating the man himself was a different matter. For five minutes Rosalie knocked at his trailer door, continuing even after Marianna had become bored with the idea. If he were inside, clearly Jolly was not accepting visitors.

A voice spoke from behind, "You 'kin rap that door all you want, m'am. Jolly is in, all right, but he don't fraternize much with nobody he don't know."

Rosalie turned to discover a dwarfish black man who barely came to her waist, smaller even than her daughter. Remembering the short clown who had pushed the large bathing tub, she had earlier assumed he was a child. He was still chowing down on the last remaining clumps of meat from his chicken bone.

"Understan', Missus, Jolly, he don't fraternize much, period, unlike m'self." He extended a small hand, pulled it back to wipe chicken fat from it, then extended it again. "Harry. Or at least half of him," he chortled.

Rosalie smiled a little wider than seemed necessary. "Well, you see, my daughter wanted to meet him." Her words felt unconvincing and contrived the moment she uttered them. "I suppose I did too. Is there any way we might speak to him. It wouldn't be for more than a min-"

The dwarf interrupted, revealing rotted teeth protruding from his gums like misshapen shards of glass. Bits of chicken hid between the spaces.

"--speak to Jolly? You and the little girl? Not damned likely, Missus. No offense, but he don't converse, not with no one. Not with me, that's damned cert'n and I've been workin' with the Palestris for thirty years now, piss on the Barnums. Jolly's English ain't much to speak of anyways, but I ain't sure he even *wants* to talk, is my opinion. Ain't never heard him mutter more'n a few syllables at one sitting."

Marianna had been hiding behind her mother, but her curiosity was aroused. "There's this girl in my class at school won't never talk to anyone

‘cause she can’t hear anything. Miss Goodman tells us she’s been deaf all her life, that’s why.”

The dwarf approached Marianna like some limping gnome and for one protective moment Rosalie considered stepping between them. But the child didn’t seem frightened. “Jolly ain’t deef, little one. Not dumb neither, ‘case you were wonderin’. He jus’ don’t choose to talk, is all.” He looked up towards Rosalie. “What I think’s best is you turn ‘round. Head back home and tell ev’ryone how much you enjoyed today’s show.”

The rusted blind behind the trailer’s small window separated for only a moment, but long enough for Rosalie to notice the pale blue eye stealing a peek at these visitors. The blind closed almost as soon as she noticed it.

“Well, there it is, ‘zackly like I tol’ you,” the little man concluded, winking at the child. “Jolly ain’t big on keepin’ company, plain an’ simple. You two have a nice day, then.” He turned to leave, but Rosalie took him aside.

“This Mister Jolly. He has a real name, right? John Jones? Abe Rabinowitz?”

The dwarf looked her over with suspicion as if the woman had asked something unthinkable of him. Rosalie fished a ten dollar bill from her purse, her back towards Marianna so the girl could not see. “Piss on the Barnums,” she whispered. The man took the bill without ceremony.

“Antonio,” he said. “Antonio Richetti, named after his late old man, Antonio Senior. Ain’t nobody calls him nothin’ but Jolly, though without his face on he seems signif’cantly less th’n joyful. When we pitch tents near the ocean he sometimes likes to take walks ‘long the shoreline in the early mornin’, so long as ain’t no one comes near, if you catch my drift.” The dwarf said nothing more and limped off.

Rosalie bent to speak to her daughter, her apology at the ready.

“I’m sorry, honey. I really thought we could talk to Mister Jolly now. But that doesn’t look like it’s going to happen. Will you settle for a corn dog?”

Marianna had no problem with the offer. Kids were resilient like that. Adults were another matter.

And Rosalie hated corn dogs.

Old Orchard Beach, Maine, Sunday May 20, 6:13 a.m.

The beach was chilly for a May morning. Deserted, too, so far south of the Old Orchard Pier, but that was because the sun had barely risen. Besides, this was a particularly desolated stretch of sand, even during the hottest days of summer. That was fortunate because the man did not want to draw attention to himself. The little black stray dog that had decided to tag alongside him was more company than he desired.

He picked up a chunk of driftwood and threw it. Although the wood was heavy the dog fetched. Maybe the animal had once belonged to someone, but the mutt's protruding ribs suggested the poor creature hadn't eaten in some time, at least not well. It wore no tags nor collar, probably one of those unfortunate pets whose owner had abandoned him and for whatever reason left the poor mongrel to fend for himself. People sometimes pulled alongside the interstate long enough to discard pets who had outlived their usefulness, then simply drove on. People could be cruel like that.

He understood cruelty and he did what he could to bring a little laughter into the world. It wasn't enough, of course. It never was.

He threw the chunk of wood again, realizing this might draw unwanted attention. With the circus in town he didn't feel like being recognized and hoped no one stood close enough to see his face hidden beneath the parka's hood.

The dog returned with the heavy stick, breathing harder with the effort, willing to dutifully continue this game although it probably felt exhausted and hungry. It desired this stranger's acceptance, maybe hoping this time to have found a home.

It hadn't, of course. Even a fool knew that much.

Or a clown.

Removing the hunk of driftwood from the dog's mouth, he patted the mongrel. The mutt licked his hand, its stubby tail wagging wildly with the certainty that this time he had discovered a true friend.

He hadn't. That was not the way the world worked. But Antonio had brought some happiness into the pitiful creature's life, even if for only a moment. He inched closer to the dunes and the dog followed.

Hidden by a tall mound, the man kneeled, again patted the mutt, then brought the driftwood down on the animal's head. It staggered briefly. He struck it again and a third time, each blow faster and harder. Whining, the little dog tried getting to its feet, stumbled, then fell face first in the sand.

Hovering over the limp animal the man waited for tears, hoped for them. But genuine tears were a luxury no clown could afford and they didn't come. He carried the animal hidden beneath his parka toward the surf, digging a small hole close to the shore line. The tide would be in soon and the pitiful abandoned creature would be forgotten.

["The world sees a clown always smiling, Anton, even if behind his smile he grits his teeth and sniffs back tears at the injustices of that world."]

Antonio Richetti waited for the tide to come in, smiling all the while.

["You must always smile, Anton ..."]

He did not see the woman in the cut-off shorts standing alone by a distant dune watching him ...

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Rosalie had come this far, but if asked why, she could offer no logical answer. She kept her distance for many minutes, watching Richetti absentmindedly kicking sand into a hole near the surf and remembering the dwarf mentioning that the reclusive Jolly preferred to keep to himself. But sometimes a woman had to follow her instincts. "Antonio! Antonio Richetti!" she called as if to an old friend. The man in the parka turned as she approached; his face a shadow beneath its hood.

Circus people were odd ducks. Of course, Rosalie fit into that category herself. Here she was a grown woman, a parent, for Christ's sake, stalking one of them. She shouted again.

The man raised his arm implying she should stand back and Rosalie stopped cold. For one crazy moment she felt certain he would bolt like some frightened stallion she had cornered. Each faced the other on the lonely beach in a wordless stand-off.

"You don't know me, but--"

"You stay where you are!"

She couldn't place his thick accent. It sounded vaguely Italian but more likely was a hybrid of diverse tongues commingled in the circus life's peculiar stew. She hoped his ancestry might provide an opening. "I'm Rosalie. Rosalie Carillo, Italian American! And you play Mister Jolly, don't you? With the Palestri Brothers Circus? I know you don't speak much English, but you understand what I'm saying, don't you? You're him, right?"
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“Go away! I see you at my door yesterday with the little girl!”

He remembered her. That was a good sign. No matter the guy seemed pissed she had intruded. He was talking and that was good too.

“Your afternoon show, the performance with the clown car? Wasn’t it your father’s routine? That explosion - *KA-BOOM!!!* - damn, that sure scared the piss out of me when I was small. Same thing happened with my daughter during your show yesterday. Marianna is ten and loves clowns. Begged me to take her whenever the circus came to Southern Maine, then begged to meet you, pleaded with me as if you were one of those Jonas kids. You’ve got one hell of an act, wonderful and terrifying and every bit as good as your father’s.” She expected the mention of Antonio Senior would get a reaction, and it did. Richetti kicked some last clods into the hole he had dug and ventured a few steps closer.

[Something dangerous coming, something dangerous and unpredictable and so fucking exciting a girl could steam her silk panties just thinking about it ...]

“You remember my father?”

Rosalie smiled. Never had she been so ballsy with a total stranger, but she was a sucker for dark and mysterious types, always had been. If that had been her old man’s influence, it was the only one she didn’t mind.

“I wanted to tell you I came because of my daughter. But that isn’t entirely true. Marianna is home sleeping, so I can’t stay long. ***I*** wanted to meet the man behind the clown paint. I know this seems forward, but there’s something I hope you’ll remember, because I’d like to visit you tonight after the last show, if that’s all right.”

The brazen remark startled Richetti enough to study her, confirming this woman had really said what she did, long enough for Rosalie to see the man’s tanned face emerge from behind the parka. There was no hiding the smile he wore and during that moment Rosalie was smiling too.

“We’re all alike, don’t you think? People alone wearing our painted grins. I’ve seen only a little of what’s behind your mask, but I’d like to see more.”

Ballsy, no doubt about that. She licked her lips and waited.

[Your move, clown-man. Come out, Antonio, come out and play ...]

The man seemed amused with her boldness, clearly no stranger to women who threw themselves in his direction and when he spoke again the edge in his voice had disappeared. “And what of the mask *you* wear?”

[Bulls-Eye! Give the little lady a kewpie doll!]

Rosalie giggled like a schoolgirl about to get her cherry popped. She had piqued the man's curiosity as he had hers and that was enough for now. Time to wave and walk off. "Tonight, after the last show," she repeated.

She knew that Richetti's eyes were following the shimmying cheeks of her ass as she left and suspected his trailer door would swing open for her. During one brief moment she had diverted him from his solitude, but in doing this she had torn the disguise from the clown's face, had uncovered a small part of the dark soul beneath. She understood men well enough to know she had made him hungry for more.

She knew herself well enough also.

She was damned hungry too.

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Returned to her role as Marianna's mother, Rosalie rewound the morning's events over her coffee, a dozen scattered thoughts bedeviling her that she might have done something irresponsible and utterly idiotic. She had pursued men before. That wasn't the problem. There was an unknown ingredient concerning Signore Antonio Richetti, some wild card (the Joker, maybe?) that kept the performer to himself and this terrified the young mother even as it excited the seductress. For one rational moment Rosalie hoped her daughter would beg to remain with her instead of spending the night with friends, maybe plead to rent a video and pop some corn. But that didn't happen.

Slipping into her jeans, she took longer than usual putting on her face to give herself an edge with the strange showman. She expected nothing permanent; hell, the entire Palestri Brothers shebang would be pulling up stakes and moving on in a few days anyway. She asked no forevers of any man, but spending one night in the arms of a good lover, that was different.

The fairgrounds cleared by 11:30, excepting some beer swilling kids gone behind the trees to polish off the evening with a joint or to cop a quick feel from their dates. Inside the large van painted with the smiling clown's face a dim light shone where Rosalie knew Antonio Richetti waited. She stood in darkness where only yesterday the dwarf had warned her to go home, but remembering the little man's advice accelerated the runaway train inside her. Hesitating, hoping for some veneer of composure, she
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expected the worn blinds to divide as before. Instead the door swung open. It was show time.

The lamp alongside the small makeup table did not illuminate very much and the cluttered trailer, although large, seemed cramped once Rosalie stepped inside. Richetti stood rigid as a department store mannequin, the Mister Jolly costume a wispy ghost lurking inside the open wardrobe.

"So dark in here," she remarked because she couldn't think of anything else to say, but Richetti remained silent as if she had said nothing. "Now you're supposed to ask if I'd care to sit, maybe impress me with balloon animals." The thought occurred that she could still cut and run.

"I have wine," he finally uttered, the remark seeming more a statement of fact than an invitation. Entering, Rosalie nodded consent and he poured from a bottle of Merlot for each of them. The cork had already been removed; suggesting maybe Richetti had already tipped a glass or two. She sat alongside him on a small shabby couch, sipping her wine. His eyes locked with hers, but she stared right back at him.

"The little guy, Harry from the Lollipop Guild? He told me you don't talk, that your English isn't so good."

"I talk. Not much. Not often." He gulped the Merlot, impatient to pour another glass.

Rosalie smiled. "I'm flattered, I think."

"Don't be. I find you curious. Your daughter enjoys Jolly the clown? That I believe. But what is *your* interest?"

She felt as amused by the man's naïveté as by his directness, but if he were only playing with her head that was okay too. "Purely physical. Does that surprise you?" She leaned closer, her face serious. "I'm a working mother with very little free time not devoted to my child. Marianna's father is dead and I've been with very few men since she was born. I can't say I'm lonely, but a woman has needs beyond waitressing tables at Denny's. Is that honest enough for you?"

Richetti seemed both skeptical and amused, but he also had loosened up enough to offer a semblance of conversation. "On the beach you tell me your name, you mention my dead father and talk of masks. You admit to one memorable moment when my father performs, as if there are not many of these moments for you. Such is not the conduct of a woman who wants only to fuck and leave. Always there is more a woman knows than what she speaks."

“The wisdom of a clown?” she asked.

“The wisdom of a man.”

“Touché, Mister Jolly.”

“Mister Jolly is somewhere else tonight.”

“Well, ‘Antonio’, then. You’re right. There *is* more. I saw your father’s final performance the day he died. Such a terrible tragedy. I suppose watching you reproduce his act touched something in me, because my own relationship with my father left much to be desired. I envy your devotion to your memory of him. It’s something I could never feel.”

“My devotion to my father brings you to my door? This is what excites you about a man you do not know?”

She grinned, then lied. “Of course.”

“Bullshit! You know nothing of my memories regarding my father, Signora, nor of me. You should be more mindful regarding whom you envy and, for that matter, of strangers you visit past midnight!”

“We don’t have to be strangers. Not if you tell me about the man behind the greasepaint.” The remark was a gamble, a go-for-broke comment that easily could have sent Richetti back into himself, but she moved close and raised the stakes even higher. When he answered with silence, Rosalie felt convinced she had overplayed her hand. Maybe the man did want to talk, maybe needed to. But that didn’t mean he was going to.

`“You first,” he suddenly said.

Rosalie bit her lip to hide the grin. “All right. Ask.”

“Tell me about the devotion to a father you are unable to feel.”

“Ouch! You sucker punched me there, Mr. Clown.” She hadn’t expected her own reaction and her mouth went bone dry. She reached for the wine bottle, poured half a glass and downed it like a 7-11 Big Gulp.

[All right, clown-man, I can do this, just you watch.]

[I can do this ...]

“My father was abusive and a child molester. No, that’s not really accurate. He was a predator, a drunken pile of breathing dog shit and I was relieved when he died.” She felt like a woman who had taken a bet to guzzle her twelfth shot of rot gut, met the challenge and, slamming the emptied glass on the table, kept a hearty “Beat that!” ready on her tongue. “Now you. Truth or Dare?”

Richetti hesitated, clearly unused to unburdening himself with ease.

“We share more than you think, you and I, but I will not mislead you, Signora. My performances are hardly a tribute to a beloved parent. Antonio Senior was a monster who battered my mother until she drank herself into her grave. My father’s clown act is all I know; his secrets of costume and masquerade all I have *ever* known. I suppose there are worse ways to deal with the world’s sorrows, or my own. But while the man lived I hated him with all my heart. I hate him still!” Richetti gulped the Merlot from the bottle until nothing remained, wiping his mouth with dark satisfaction as if he had completed his portion of the challenge.

“Then I was correct, Antonio. We do share much in common. More than I could have imagined we--”

Richetti grabbed Rosalie’s face, mashing her cheeks between his huge hands. If before he had spoken carelessly, now he would let the wine speak for him.

“This painted face of yours? This is the mask *you* wear? A face that must belong to a whore? Who are you and why are you here?”

“I’ve already told you--”

“Lies! Lies and masks disguising more lies!”

“I came because I wanted to meet you --”

“You came because you wanted to fuck me!”

“Yes ... But I thought that was my only reason. Now I think I needed to talk to somebody -- anybody. Damn you! This is very hard for me, Antonio.” She felt as she had as a child at confession when she would invent stories to conceal her loving Papa’s dirty little secrets. Until this moment Rosalie had never intended to speak of such things, hadn’t anticipated she would want to. “Secrets are best shared with strangers who will be gone in the morning, don’t you think?”

Richetti set a steady bead on her. “Tell me yours.”

[Forgive me Father, for I have sinned ...]

[And forgive my father, Father ...]

[Because, see, my Papa ...]

“...beat the crud out of me once I’d become old enough to know what he was up to. After my mother died the kid stuff didn’t quite do it for him and by fourteen I was fighting the bastard off every night. So I arranged a little hunting mishap. Hid his safety vest under my mattress and tried out for cheerleading practice the same day some gun happy kid blew his guts into the next county.”

`“You arranged to have your father killed?”

`“No ... I simply made it easier for someone else to do it.” Richetti stepped away, but she followed. “I’m sorry. It must be the wine. Drinking always makes me babble. I’ve said too much, haven’t I?”

`He would not look at her, instead speaking to the wall.

`“So perhaps you come to my door this night to experience the forbidden excitement you remember of your father’s touch? You are here because when lovemaking feels impermissible and dangerous, only then can you taste the pleasure?”

“That’s not true.”

“A cruel parent creates rage and confusion in a child that lasts a lifetime. Such emotions do not remain hidden.”

“So they’re now teaching psychology in clown school, Antonio?”

“A clown is born, not taught! That explains why I too lived as my father demanded, isolated from anyone who was not part of the circus and from any true friend. My days were a sequence of endless carnivals around the world. As a child I dared not disobey him, but when I had grown enough to master his professional secrets, I determined he would cause me no further misery. You witnessed the consequence of my determination the night he died, Signora. Now, which of us has said too much?”

Rosalie had no answer, torn between hauling ass while she could, or taking Antonio Richetti into her arms and fucking the man’s brains out. She did neither, instead added “Maybe we’ve both said too much.”

The unearthed ghosts were unwelcome visitors and Rosalie sat alongside Richetti, staring at nothing, saying nothing. Richetti broke the silence, taking the woman’s hand and stroking her hair in a gesture that might have seemed loving had they known each other longer than a few minutes.

“Look at me, Signora. Look at me and tell me what you see.”

Even in the sickly yellow light of the old floor lamp Richetti was ruggedly handsome. Perhaps it was better not to speak of yesterdays best forgotten, to concentrate only on the moment, because this moment was really all she would have.

“Antonio, if you could observe your face through my eyes you wouldn’t need to ask.”

“But I do, you see. I do need to ask.”

She moved near. “Here’s your answer.”

Reaching to feel the warmth of his cheek pressed against hers, Rosalie drew closer. She felt flushed, her cheek heated with the pressure of a man's flesh and she knew she was going to kiss him once she turned to gaze into those impossibly blue eyes, she was going to kiss his mouth and then sleep with him, that was as certain as sin and it was about time too, damn it, because she had waited long enough and a woman has needs, she sure as hell does. She clung to his body, touched him, the anticipation pulling her closer.

[Yes ... Oh God, yes ...]

[...]

Something wasn't right. Richetti's skin felt warm, *(But it's supposed to feel warm!)* and against her own it also felt *[wet? moist?]* maybe even a little gummy and

(What the--?)

... just not right ...

[Not right...]

[Notrightnot ...]

Pasty goo clung to her cheek. She examined her fingertips and they were dripping with fleshy chunks of the stuff. Richetti looked away as if ashamed, but then seemed to have second thoughts.

"No ... I think you should see ..."

His sweating flesh had begun to drip like melting cheese along the snail tracks left by Rosalie's fingers. He reached for a towel near the mirror and rubbed it against the dribbling remnants of his features as a kid might try washing clean a filthy face. Damp clumps of greasy matter slithered down his chin in a fleshy mud slide and from behind the decomposed mask something was taking an indistinct shape. Rosalie watched as the jack o' lantern smile emerged, a wide and unlikely crimson grin that spread across his entire countenance, revealing teeth stained orange with greasepaint.

Richetti's face no longer was there.

The eternally smiling Mister Jolly *was*.

"Your mask is so much more easily removed than mine, Signora. Mine disguises a face which is the handiwork of my famous father. He carved this clown's smile on my lips while I was a child, mutilating my face with pocket knives and dye. Mister Jolly requires no mask. But Antonio does."

He grasped Rosalie's arm where she stood, his fingers sopping with the sticky glops of residue that had been his face.

"Do you like what you see, Signora? Tell me, do I remain the handsome man you so much wanted to fuck?"

He released her, but Rosalie couldn't move. She didn't want the tears to come, but they came anyway, smearing her face with black streaks of damp eyeliner. She hoped she wouldn't scream, knowing that if she remained another minute she would.

"I'm so sorry ... Oh, God, I can't! I just *can't* --"

She stumbled through the door into darkness.

At last the woman's words had rung true. It seemed almost comical how clown-like she appeared while crying, her tears discoloring her cheeks as they did. So terribly sad at the same time, almost heartbreaking, her pity and disgust. But he knew better than to wait for tears of his own. They would never come. This was the way the world worked for a clown, wasn't it? What more could he offer but smiles at her pain and his own?

He listened for the fleeing footsteps. The wine had caused her to falter, slowed her down. Noting the direction she took toward the deserted midway, he remembered that the parking area, a good distance from the performers' trailers, was now black as pitch. The woodlands beyond stretched miles, possibly clear to Canada. That was fortunate.

Taking a moment to slip into the parti-striped costume, he placed the orange wig on his head until its position felt perfect. He didn't need to check his appearance in the small mirror near the sink.

"Such masks we must wear to hide the sadness. But did I not make you smile at least for a little while, Signora?"

Reaching into the great pouch of the costume, Mister Jolly removed from it the newly sharpened meat cleaver. Smiling as only a circus clown can, he stepped into the darkened carnival of the night.

SILENT FOR THE SAKE OF SILENCE

Brian Fatah Steele

The mime was still at the end of the block, performing alone under the streetlamp. Across the street and three houses down, Laura could easily see him from her bedroom window. Still there, always there, like he had been for weeks. He rarely disappeared and only when no one was looking. Just like the others.

Letting the curtains fall back into place, she returned to her bed. Agonizing over the mime's presence wasn't helping anything. There was nothing she or anyone could do. One of the talking heads on the news had advised the public to regard the mimes as nothing more than part of the landscape. Laura found that difficult to swallow, as trees and buildings didn't smile at her.

Even though it was late, Laura could hear her father puttering around the house. Most likely on the phone, dealing with one of his oh-so-important clients. Larry Doetsch's world revolved around numbers and it had no place for something as absurd as mimes. It didn't matter that one had taken up residence within sight of his home—as long as he ignored it, it didn't exist. Laura wondered if he tried that same principle on her.

She tried to be mad at her father. She tried to worry about the homework she didn't finish, she tried to think about the two incredibly hot seniors in her geometry class and she tried to imagine the trip French Club was slated to take at the end of the school year. She tried, but somehow the mime crept into everything. A silent taint, there in the background.

Curling up under the comforter, she did her best to banish any thoughts at all and find sleep.

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"You look like shit," announced Kirsten bright and early the next morning.

Laura frowned as she threw her backpack into the rear of the Volvo and climbed in beside her best friend. "Shut up."

Kirsten looked immaculate as she did every morning, her golden hair trimmed short into a pixie cut, makeup applied expertly around her green eyes and couture clothes perfect on her petite frame. Laura had woken up
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just in time to run a brush through her long brown hair and that had been it. No time for makeup, breakfast, or anything.

"Just looking out for you," said Kirsten, as she backed out of the driveway. "There's an extra makeup kit in the glove box."

She was busy pulling down the vanity mirror to examine the dark circles under her eyes, so it took her a moment to realize which direction Kirsten was going. "What are you doing?"

"Driving past the mime, of course!"

"Why?"

"Uh, because he's awesome," said Kirsten as the car came to a stop at the intersection.

Laura hid her face, refusing to look. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Kirsten waving at the performer. Something the mime did made her friend giggle. Actually giggle. Laura pulled her arms up over her head, folding in on herself. Then a shadow fell over the passenger side window and she knew. She knew the mime was right outside the car, only inches away. Nothing separated her from it but a thin piece of glass. She could feel it there, moving, dancing; mocking her.

"Please," was all Laura was able to get out.

"Whatever," said Kirsten as she pulled away.

Laura didn't bother putting on any make-up. The tears would have just ruined any attempts. She didn't speak to Kirsten until fourth period.

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No one paid much attention to the mimes when they first began to appear. There's no recorded event of the first appearance, although there is speculation on the time frame. Perhaps one or two had even been here for far longer, but the initial influx began in late summer. It wasn't considered newsworthy by the United States mostly because all the news outlets were concentrated on the U.S. Embassy bombing in China. The fear of war and repeated attacks kept the media busy for a sold three months, up until a faction of radicals were deemed responsible. It was around this time the United States started to pay attention to the news coming out of Europe.

The mimes were everywhere. Hundreds of thousands of them, all over Europe and Asia, mostly in the metropolitan areas. More reports followed—stories of them sighted in Africa, Australia, and South America.
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They were everywhere. While all slightly different, they all appeared of the "French School" —primarily clad in black and white, with a touch of red somewhere in their outfit, their faces painted in a similar fashion. If the idea that there was an army of mimes, possibly totaling millions, wasn't bizarre enough, further observation led many to find the silent performers terrifying.

They performed without end. They never stopped to sleep, eat, or relieve themselves. No one had ever heard a single sound come from them. For days, if not weeks on end, it was just the performance. Going fishing, pulling the rope, running in place and, of course, the glass wall. They were always there, whether anyone was watching or not.

Except when they weren't.

CCTV cameras, surveillance drones and even satellites had been tasked with keeping an eye on the subjects. But there were so many of them, it was impossible. More unnerving, it was found that when unobserved, some mimes simply *vanished.* Gone without trace and no clue to where they had gone, only to reappear days later in the same manner. This led some military leaders to denounce them as insurgents and call for action. Others laughed and reminded them that this was a bunch of mimes.

The action came a month later in Australia and not as predicted. A group of youths took it upon themselves to accost one of the performers in Sydney. Six young men plus a crowd cheering them on against one mime. The footage is confusing to watch, movements too fast and there is a distortion in the contrast of light and shadows in the video. Regardless, the outcome is indisputable. Fifteen dead bodies, eight badly injured and the mime performing again in the same spot as if nothing had happened.

Various militaries around the world responded to this "act of aggression" in their own ways. Soldiers, tanks, bombs, whatever was deemed necessary. Thousands of lives were lost. Not a single mime died.

It was decided it might be best to leave the mimes alone until more information could be gathered.

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All of the snow had melted, but spring was having a difficult time breaking through the chill. A deep cold weighed over all of Cleveland and even the slightest gust of wind made it biting. Laura was still nestled inside her
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winter jacket halfway into March. She had almost backed out on Kirsten. It hadn't seemed worth it.

The mall had been packed. Another Saturday afternoon excursion to blow money on stuff they didn't need. Westlake was one of the more affluent areas and the mall was a perfect menagerie of the people who populated it. Over-privileged, yet somehow jaded, disconnected in a deeply profound way. At least that's how Laura saw them. It's how she saw herself.

She had bought a new shirt at some boutique whose name she couldn't even remember now. She hadn't even wanted the shirt. Kirsten had pushed her to purchase it, gushing over how it would showcase her cleavage, one of the few attributes Laura had in abundance over her friend. One small item in a bag versus the three large bags overflowing with Kirsten's new acquisitions. A normal day at the mall, all things considered.

Afternoon was just rolling into evening when the girls pulled into Laura's driveway. Kirsten's mother was having her boyfriend stay over again, so Kirsten was once more banished to Laura's for the night. Laura had wondered if such things upset her friend, but Kirsten had laughed it off, saying that every weekend she got tossed out, her dad gave her an extra bonus on her allowance. "Bitch tax," they both called it. Laura didn't know whether to be amused or appalled.

They were discussing the prospect of pizza or Chinese being delivered when Kirsten stopped in mid sentence.

"What?" asked Laura.

Kirsten only stared, a strange look on her face. Laura followed her gaze down the street. A group of people were watching the mime perform. Before Laura could say anything, her friend had slammed the driver's side door and had begun heading across the sidewalk.

"Kirsten, stop!"

"C'mon, let's just watch for a second," she replied, not even turning around.

"Please! Don't want to!" said Laura.

Laura recognized a number of the people in the group. Mr. Keating and his wife lived at the end of the block, right across from the mime. One of the young men looked vaguely familiar, but not his friend or the two young women accompanying them. It looked like Mrs. Keating was

holding something in front of her and was trying desperately to engage the mime in conversation.

"What's she doing?" Kirsten questioned out loud.

Laura grabbed her arm. "I don't care. Let's go."

"Why are you so…?"

The question was never finished, however, because the scene at the end of the block burst into frantic violence. Later, the police would piece together all the sad events and just shake their heads. The Keatings, having heard rumors of some people becoming friendly with local mimes, translated this into a misguided attempt to appease their silent neighbor with freshly baked cookies. While their mime seemed to show gratitude at the gesture, he showed no desire to partake in the treats. Before even initiating contact, they had called their nephew in as a sort of backup. He had arrived with three friends in tow. It had been his male friend who thought force-feeding a cookie to the mime a good idea. This had resulted in evisceration.

Everyone was questioned, far away from the mime who continued performing a series of musical endeavors like playing drums, the piano and the violin. Everyone was horrified by the encounter, especially Mrs. Keating who had to be sedated. Everyone but Kirsten. The idea that some people had actually connected with the mimes in some manner became an obsession with her.

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Most of the world tried to ignore the mime issue; it was too bizarre to be readily considered without the mind rebelling. Many theories were floated, everything from an alien invasion to a massive Illuminati plot. Comparing notes, most governments had come to the general consensus that the mimes could be numbered in the tens of millions now. Almost more disturbing, however, was that after utilizing state of the art facial recognition software, none of the mimes appeared to be anyone in any database. They weren't missing, they weren't joining a cause; they hadn't come from some previously recorded life. They simply appeared as mimes one day and more were always coming.

Maybe the amount of mimes had reached a tipping point; maybe the sheer absurdity of the situation finally ate away at the collective human
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psyche. More and more pockets of violence began to break out, people simply lashing out at the mimes. It never ended well. It never mattered. Even more inexplicable, places where the mimes appeared were revered, regarded as holy. The world became split,and slowly began a descent into madness.

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Spring had finally bothered arriving in Cleveland, wet and dreary. The last few months had been quiet for Laura, slowly dragging along. Her father, rarely around to begin with, had been unavailable even more. While his absence stung, it was Kirsten's that hurt even more. Laura had other friends, but she and Kirsten had been inseparable since grade school. Ever since the day the mime at the end of her block had killed someone, she had been distant.

Laura had always been lonely, prone to sadness. That happens when you lose your mom to cancer at the age of six. She had never blamed her mom, the way some kids do, but she did blame her father for his reactions to everything since then. It's why he held the title "father," but why she'd never call him "dad."

Laura was ruminating over her failed family life and was surprised when Kirsten slid in across from her at a lunch table. Her pixie cut had been dyed from blonde to a bright fire engine red. For a moment, Laura was too shocked by the change to say anything.

"You like it?" asked Kirsten.

"Eh, yeah," replied Laura. "That's pretty severe for you."

"I'm trying a different look."

"Looks good with your colour eyes," said Laura.

"Thanks," said Kirsten. "Listen, I'm sorry about being so weird recently. I had to work through some things. After seeing that dude die, I kinda, I needed some time. Okay?"

Laura nodded. "Okay, I get that."

"So are we cool? Take out and movies tonight?"

Laura smiled. "Absolutely."

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The empty pizza box sat on the coffee table between them, illuminated by the flicker of the television. The night had gone well, just like so many previous in years past. The raunchy comedy flick they had rented had been great, Kirsten almost spewing diet soda across the room during one scene. They hadn't paid much attention to the Tom Cruise buddy cop flick, spending more time on gossip and Laura's hair. She had been wrestling with the decision to chop her long locks to shoulder length for months.

"Do it," said Kirsten. "It'll be easier to manage. I've never regretted cutting all mine off."

"Yeah, but you've got the face to pull it off," said Laura.

"Shut up, so do you. And you're not talking about anything so severe."

Laura reclined at the end of the couch, pulling on strands of her brown hair. It had been a nervous habit she had picked up on early in her youth. It was one of the main reasons she was hesitant to cut it. Watching Kirsten reach for the final slice of pizza, Laura realized that giving up her hair would be almost as hard as giving up her best friend. They were both a sort of comfort.

"I'm sorry," said Laura, looking away.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to… after the mime. I know how I can be. I'm sorry."

Kirsten stared at her, a jumble of emotions rotating across her face. Twice it looked as if she were about to say something, then stopped herself. She looked away towards the television, back to Laura, and sighed.

"This is exactly where I want to be right now," said Kirsten. "Okay? Don't ever think otherwise."

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Laura had a wonderfully comfortable queen-sized bed and had never seen any reason why Kirsten needed to sleep on the couch or the floor when she stayed over. Nothing sexual had ever occurred between the two, despite what the idiot boys in their homeroom wished to fantasize about. There was more than enough room for the both of them and Laura had grown accustomed to Kirsten's presence beside her years ago. She also didn't notice right away when Kirsten was gone.
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It took Laura waking up a second time, her mind clicking into place, to recall that another person should be in the bed with her. Rolling over, she laid there for a moment, listening. Bathroom, kitchen, something. It took another minute for her sleep-infused brain to realize Kirsten was no longer in the house.

Up and moving, it took everything not to call out her name. Her father was sleeping just down the hall. Her toes struck something by the foot of the bed. Kirsten's backpack. The clothes she had been wearing along with her pajamas lay in a pile beside it. Laura immediately discarded the idea that her friend was wandering around somewhere naked. There had to have been a third set of clothes.

Laura hurried to her closet to pull on a pair of jeans and a sweater. A terrifying thought festered at the corner of her mind, one she refused to allow come to the surface. Moving past her windows to grab a pair of shoes, though, it broke into reality. Out on the sidewalk, clad in black pants and a black and white striped shirt, she could see Kirsten making her way towards the mime, her red hair a beacon in the streetlamps.

Laura barrelled down the steps, out the door and raced towards the mime. Kirsten had already met up with it, engaged it in some fashion. Now, never before seen, it had taken Kirsten by the hand and was leading her into an alleyway. Laura screamed her name and ran faster. The mime and her best friend disappeared into the narrow space where the light of the streetlamps didn't reach. Tears streamed down Laura's face as she continued screaming, her feet slapping the asphalt in desperation.

Spinning into the alleyway, ready to face her fear for the sake of her friend, she found it empty. Nothing but garbage cans, cardboard boxes, and an old air conditioner. Both the mime and Kirsten were gone.

Laura sank down to the sidewalk and sobbed.

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"I have to get to work, Laura," said Larry Doetsch.

Laura gawked at her father, his utter lack of concern astounding. Times like these, she truly wondered if he wished she had died along with her mother. He hadn't said "I love you" since she was ten years old, but threw money at her in way of compensation.
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Fortunately for Laura, her father's fear of scandal would motivate him where his lack of parental duty wouldn't.

"Kirsten was here, last night. *Here,* Father. And since she's still a minor, that means she was your responsibility. When the police show up and they will, are you going to say you were too busy going to work to walk down the street?"

Her father went pale. "Are you serious?"

"When a sixteen year old girl goes missing, yes, people tend to investigate!"

"Fine! Let's go interview a mime," he said. "What nonsense."

Completely dressed for work and still clutching his briefcase, Larry Doetsch stomped his way up the block to see the mime. Laura followed behind, suddenly unsure about what she expected her father to do. The force of entire governments had been focused on the mimes and failed. She realized that perhaps a part of her still held on to the hope that her "dad" was in there somewhere and could make it all better. That, and she couldn't sit back and do nothing.

Sadly, Larry Doetsch didn't seem to remotely understand what he was facing. Introducing himself and offering his hand, the mime immediately began mocking her father by blowing a kiss. His continued efforts to question the mime resulted in it pretending to be a puppet on strings. Her father did not appreciate this. He began to threaten the mime with legal action. The mime looked at Laura, stuck its tongue out and began to ride an invisible bicycle. Larry Doetsch started yelling about respect and a police investigation. The mime gave an exaggerated silent sigh, brought up his extended index figure and thumb in the imitation of a gun.

Then pulled the trigger.

Laura remembered her father's head exploding. She could remember the feel of the blood and matter splattering all over her. That was all. Somehow she made it back down the street. She heard sirens, but the police never arrived. No questions being asked, no paramedics checking her for injuries, nothing to indicate anything had occurred. So Laura tried to pretend nothing had.

She sat in a quiet house, in a blood stained sweater and waited for whatever came next.

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There had been sirens, but they had been elsewhere in Westlake. They had been all over Cleveland, all over the world. Sirens, alarms and klaxons of all kinds. The mimes, once satisfied to perform and only attack if provoked, were now lashing out at whim. No longer reactionary, their targets and methods had no fathomable pattern. A restaurant patio full of customers here, an entire Tai Chi class there. Then a lone taxi cab driver, followed by a small dormitory at Boston College. It didn't seem to matter where, when, or the amount of people. The irony was not lost on the rest of the world that the single largest mime attack had occurred at Charles de Gaulle Airport in France. The idea that thousands had been slaughtered in only minutes was sobering, however. Reports continued in from Moscow, Tokyo, New Delhi, Caracas, London, Pretoria and all across the globe. Helsinki was first to go silent, quickly followed by Stockholm. Then, without warning, all of Brazil went dark.

The mimes continued to spread out like a plague over the planet.

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It had been five days.

Laura hadn't bothered going to school, although the one time she had bothered to check her phone on Tuesday, she had noticed a post about it getting cancelled. Later that night, the power had gone out. She had eaten a can of green beans straight from the can and gone back to sleep on the couch.

Before the loss of power, all she had done was watch the news, the histrionic faces proclaiming doomsday from the screen. All channels seemed in agreement for once and the scenes broadcast from around the world did little to dispel their consensus. It had taken Laura two days to strip off the blood stained shirt and now it appeared she had cleaned herself up only to face the apocalypse.

She supposed she loved her father in her own way. She hoped he had loved her the same. Still, no child should ever have to watch a parent die like that. Her mom's death had been bad enough and she barely remembered it. Her father was dead and Kirsten was simply gone. Kirsten. It was her choice as much as her disappearance that baffled Laura.

She understood now that the dyed red hair was a symbol, a spot of color to go along with the black and white outfit. A sacrifice, an acquiescence; a pledge of loyalty? Had Kirsten known something, or was she taking it on faith? There had been no corpse left there in the alleyway, both vanished, only the mime appearing the next day.

That fifth day, there were screams echoing out of the townhouses all around her.

Laura agonized over the phrase "a fate worse than death."

She spent the entire sixth day cleaning up the house, going through her things and reminiscing and finally penning a short note. All the screams in the area had ceased, as had the sirens. She had picked out an outfit after multiple tries, although she wasn't terribly thrilled with it. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry when she realized how nervous she was about it, almost as if it was a date. Perhaps in a way it was. White skinny jeans tucked into black boots with a button down black and white blouse. She tied her hair back and finished the ensemble with a red scarf. Laura didn't think Kirsten had painted her face since she had not found any of that type of makeup in her bag. In any case, Laura didn't have any.

The front door latching behind her was loud, the only sound around. The street was so much darker without the streetlamps, the stars faint glimmer doing little to light her way. Laura brought nothing with her, no phone, no keys; no identification. There was no need. This was a one way ticket. Either the mime would transport her somewhere new, or it would kill her on sight.

Sure enough, there it was. Performing on the corner, pretending to be blown away in a non-existent wind. The creature that had robbed her of a father and a best friend, something masquerading as a man. Its eyes seemed to shine in the darkness, its motions fluid and unnatural. It turned to Laura and acted pleasantly surprised to her. It began to juggle invisible balls while singing her a ballad of nothing.

Laura swallowed her terror as deep as possible. "I'm here for you."

The mime stopped its faux-singing, taking an amplified look of confusion upon its painted face.

"I'm here for you to take me," said Laura. "You killed my father and took my best friend. You took Kirsten. I'd rather go with you."

The mime stopped juggling.

"I'd rather go with you than die. I want to be with Kirsten."

It was difficult to make out exactly what the mime was doing, just standing there examining Laura for a moment. It seemed in contemplation, as if weighing a decision. It was the first truly *human* thing Laura had ever seen the mime do. It appeared to come to some conclusion when it reached out its hand, offering it to Laura.

Letting out a small sob, she took the mime's hand and allowed herself to be led towards the alleyway. An array of emotions and expectations roared through her, the unknown rearing large. The mimes were slaughtering a brutal, bizarre path across Earth. This mime had cut one through her own life, and she was walking into darkness with it. The sobs came heavier as the shadows of alleyway enveloped them, but she didn't let go of its hand.

"Please," said Laura, squeezing the hand tighter, having no more words. "Please."

The darkness was absolute, not even the stars had access here. It was darker than it should be. Thicker, more solid. Then the light crept in, streams of brightness that seared their way through the blackness. Ribbons of illumination which did little to banish the deeper black, but somehow coexisted with it. White and black. There, that spot of red, blooming like the mime's flower, here like a miniature supernova.

The darkness gripped her while the light investigated her, the blazing white tendrils flickering back to the crimson explosion and reporting its findings. Laura knew all of this because the light wove through her mind, leaving an understanding of the process. An understanding of the purpose.

The forces at play inside her psyche grew to be too much, the magnitude of what was occurring. She lost consciousness as the apple-sized supernova drew closer to her face.

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It had been over a week since Laura had awoken outside Kavala, Greece. She had instinctually known the other two hundred people who had appeared there over the next few days, just as she had somehow known that Kirsten was safe in Jakarta. The same way she had known the mimes were gone and that the human population of Earth was now down to only one billion.
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Some people still talked about it, desperate to find meaning in it all. Why were some chosen to live? Why was everyone relocated? Why the hell take the shape of mimes? Laura didn't bother worrying about it all. There was one thing she managed to take away from her time with the mime back in Cleveland, now that she was in the Mediterranean.

Life shouldn't be a performance.

BLOOD AND LAUGHTER

Neil Leckman

My fingers smear that pasty white that covers my face
Each stroke takes me closer to another place
Where I am less than me and always free
I cavort and dance and sing with glee
Floppy shoes and silver bells that tinkle as a walk
A red bulbous nose I often squeeze while I talk
Laughter from eager crowds that live inside my head
Getting louder and louder until you're dead
Finally I wipe all the paint from my face
Put on my uniform and take my place
To protect and serve is my other life
But it is blood and laughter that are my wife.

MEET THE AUTHORS

Olivia Arieti, a US citizen with a degree from the University of Pisa, lives in Torre del Lago Puccini, Italy with her family. Her plays and poems have been published both in the USA and UK. Her short stories appeared in The Smoking Poet, Enchanted Conversations, Daily Bites Of Flesh 2011 Pill Hill Press, Voices From The Garage, Riverbabble, Halloween Anthology Magic Cat Press, Christmas Warmth Anthology Xoxo Publishing, Medieval Nightmares Anthology Static Movement. Her horror stories have been recently accepted by other Static Movement anthologies.

Patricia (Anabel) Burton was born in Slovakia, but has lived in UK past 16 years. She has a home in South London, which she shares with her husband and a black kitten Sphinx. She loves gothic literature and movies. Writing is her hobby, as well as creating silver jewellery of her own design.

Brian Barnett lives in Frankfort, Kentucky with his wife, Stephanie and his two sons.

Patricia (Anabel) Burton of Slovak origin spends her free time dreaming up dark twists and verses and creating bespoke jewellery inspired by her love for vampiric and gothic culture. Her poetry and a short story appeared in anthologies Hell, Grave Robbers, Serial Killers Tres Tria, Bones, Ugly Babies 2 (James Ward Kirk Publishing) and in Static Movement's Gothic Poetry and Flash Fiction. Her work is also featured online, in December issue of The Sirens Call eZine – Dead & Dying.

Dave Carne lives in the Usk Valley, South Wales. He has been married for thirty years and has four grown up children. When he is not writing, Dave goes rambling around the Welsh countryside with his wife and best friend, Sue.

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. His short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *The Literary Hatchet* and *Woman's World*, as well as in anthologies and online at *Liquid Imagination*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Mysterical-E*, and elsewhere.

David Frazier wrote a short story for the book, *Kindred Voices 2* published by the University of Massachusetts. He has written poetry for editor/publisher James Ward Kirk of Indianapolis,IN and is featured in his books: *Indiana Horror 2012* and *Indiana Science Fiction 2012*. David has many poems on line.

Timothy Frasier is a novelist, short story writer and poet. His work appears in several Static Movement anthologies. He has appeared in two Big Biting Pig horror movies, *Spirit Stalkers* and *Lucid* (release date 2013). He lives in Western Kentucky with his wife, Lisa, and their German shepherds. When not working, writing, or shooting guns, he's an active member of the Hanson Writers Workshop in Hanson, Kentucky.

Ken Goldman, former Philadelphia teacher of English and Film Studies, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories have appeared in over 690 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia with over twenty due for publication in 2014. Since 1993 Ken's tales have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written five books: his anthologies of short stories, YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!! (Sam's Dot Publishers); DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE (A/A Productions), and STAR-CROSSED (Vampires 2 Publishers); and a novella, DESIREE, (Damnation books). His novel, OF A FEATHER, was published in January 2014 by the UK's Horrific Tales Publishers. Reviewers of any of the above books are welcome, but Ken asks that you be kind.

Anna Harris writes from her home in Australia. Work, friends, family and an aversion to debt keep her there so it's fortunate her imagination lets her roam around the world and back again whenever wanderlust strikes. All other voids are assuaged by chocolate.

A J Humpage has short stories and poetry published in anthologies like 6 Sentences, Pill Hill Press, Static Movement and many e-zines. She dispenses writing advice at http://allwritefictionadvice.blogspot.com and is on Twitter: @AJHumpage
Her first novel, Blood of the Father, is available on Amazon Kindle.

Ken L. Jones has been professionally active in the world of popular culture for the last thirty years. He first gained notice for his numerous articles and interviews in all of the comic book trade magazines. He later worked prolifically as a writer of comic books at Disney and Harvey Comics and on many independent titles including the one he co-created with horror director David Todd Ocvirk, the well-regarded horror tome Uncle Tickle. He also has work in Weird City II, I Swear This Is True, Science Gone Mad and Dark Dispatches.

Kevin L. Jones has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press.

Ron Koppelberger is a poet, short story writer and an artist. He has been published in England, Australia, Canada, Japan, India, Mauritius, Italy, France, Germany, China, Spain and Thailand. His art is viewable on Facebook under will806095@bellsouth.net.

Neil Leckman lives in Colorado with his wife of more than thirty years and only recently began writing seriously. He does it for fun, to share with others and hopes you enjoy the ride.

Jordan Elizabeth Mierek's short stories and poetry are published in Wagonbridge Publishing's ghost story anthology 13 Haunting Tales, Short Story Me, Danse Macabre, Bewildering Stories, Writing Raw, Dark and Dreary Magazine, Storyhouse, the Magical Library, RiverSedge, and AboutTeens. Her work has won awards in The XPress and Utica Writers Club. She writes monthly for New Hartford Life magazine. She is the current president of the Utica Writers Club and has a Bachelor's degree in elementary education.

Ashley Pasco lives in the southern part of United States in Arkansas where hunting and fishing is a way of life. She doesn't hunt that often but she loves to fish at the river throughout the summers. When she's not writing she's

reading, playing her guitar, or watching her favorite TV shows which consist of Doctor Who and The Fosters, among others.

James Pratt has been writing on a regular basis for four years now, mostly weird horror with the occasional dash of fantasy, sci-fi and action, and started submitting stories for publication last year. So far he has stories appearing in four anthologies available on Amazon.com: "Canopic Jars: Tales of Mummies and Mummification", "Demonic Visions Vols.1 and 2", and "Thirteen". He also have three short story collections available on Amazon: "Cthelvis and Others", "Horrible Stories for Terrible People Vol. 1 - Monsters", and "Horrible Stories for Terrible People Vol. 2 -Obscura". In addition to writing short stories, he is currently working on a weird Western novel set firmly in the Lovecraft universe and intended to be the first of a trilogy.

J.R. Roper is a teacher and speculative fiction writer from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Horror is his favorite genre for short fiction and when poetry is gifted from the Muses, it is always dark. He has written two middle grade fantasy novels and is working on his third, a dark thriller. His short stories are included in *Dark Light Three* and *Cirque D'Obscure* by Crushing Hearts and Black Butterfly Publishing. Coffee runs in his veins.

Brian Fatah Steele has been writing various types of Horror for over ten years now. Along with his various novels and collections, his work has appeared in such places as 4pocalypse, Blood Type, and the Bram Stoker Award nominated Dark Visions, Vol. 1. Steele lives in Ohio with a few cats and survives on a diet of coffee and cigarettes. He still hopes to one day become a super-villain.

Gene Stewart is a writer and artist. He currently lives in the Midwest American Wilderness where he is researching tales of mystical realism, writing ficta mystica, and exploring the dark by casting a little light into the shadows. His website is genestewart.com/wordpress where there are many samples of his work and much else; come explore.

Shane Ward used to spend most of his time dreaming up stories and tales that deserve to be out there for all to read. He's been writing for many years now, his first project was fan fiction and he can still be found writing stories

for his favourite TV shows, but he has now moved on to telling personal stories and attempting to become a professional novelist. His chosen genre is Science Fiction and he had written many stories in this field. His preferred storytelling is similar to that of David Baldacci and John Gresham with a hit of Kevin J Anderson.

Matthew Wilson is an English writer whose work had been printed in Horror Zine (Print Edition), Carillon Magazine and Starline Poets Associates. He has never been scared of clowns. Never. Maybe once.

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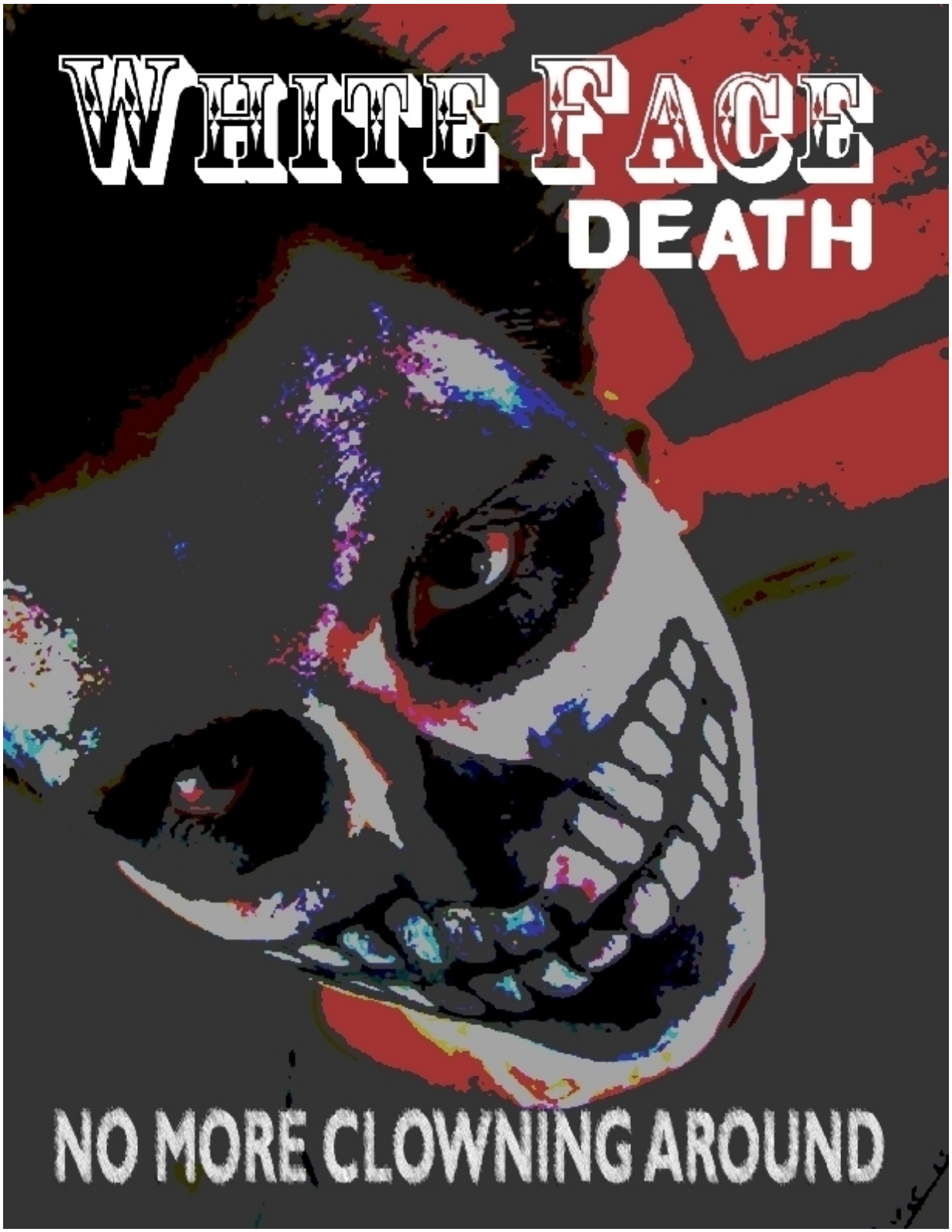
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